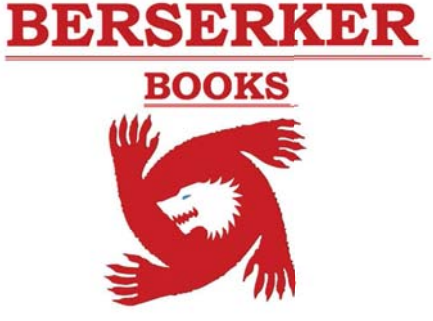
THE VIKINGS

JEAN RENAUD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Jean Renaud

The Vikings

Facts and Legends

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How do you pronounce Old Norse, the language of the Vikings?

Vowels	Like the Vikings (in their day)	Like the Icelanders (today)
á	â as in ‘pâte’	ao as in ‘Laos’ é é as in ‘été’
ié as in ‘fié’		
ó	o as in ‘pot’	ow as in the English *‘know’*
u	ou as in ‘roux’	u as in ‘rue’
ú	or as in ‘moue’	or as in ‘moue’ y u as in ‘nu’
i as in ‘rice’		
ý	u as in ‘dure’	i as in ‘mire’ æ è as in ‘mère’
		ail as in ‘bail’ œ
	eu as in ‘creuse’	ail as in ‘bail’ ø eu as in ‘neuf’
eu as in ‘neuf’		
ǫ	o as in the English *‘not’*	‘eu’ as in ‘peur’ (written ‘ö’ in modern Icelandic)
au	aou as in ‘Raoul’	oy as in ‘oyez’

ei	eil as in ‘vermeil’	'eil' as in 'vermeil'
ey	éu as in ‘réussi’	'eil' as in 'vermeil'

The other vowels are pronounced as in French.

Consonants

ð	th (voiced) as in the English ‘this’
f	f as in ‘fou’, at the beginning of a word or followed by a voiceless consonant v as in ‘vu’, in all other cases
g	g as in ‘gare’ y as in ‘yoga’, before i or j
h	h (strongly exhaled) as in the English ‘how’ j y as in ‘yoga’
p	p as in ‘pas’ f as in ‘fool’, before s or t
r	very strongly rolled the ending -r, marking the nominative singular in certain declensions, is pronounced with a supporting vowel similar to a French u (e.g. *fjǫrðr*), which is written in modern Icelandic as -ur (*fjörður*)
s	ss (voiceless) as in ‘bass’
z	ts as in ‘tsar’
þ	th (voiceless) as in the English ‘thing’

The other consonants are pronounced as in French.

In modern Icelandic, ll and rl are pronounced ‘dl’, and rn is pronounced ‘dn’.

Stress:

All words are stressed on the first syllable. In compound words, a secondary stress falls on the first syllable of the second element.

Foreword

> ‘The Viking, that figurehead who precedes Scandinavian renown throughout the world, continues to leave his legendary mark on the readily nostalgic imagination of the Nordic peoples.’
>
> Frédéric DURAND, *The Image of the Viking in Scandinavian Literature*, 1957

The Norman poet Louis Beuve, who, at the end of the 19th century, following the example of Frédéric Mistral in Provence, sang the praises of Normandy and its roots, could not have put it better when, in the magazine *Le Bouais-Jan,* he wrote (in patois) these verses about the Vikings:

> ‘Lads who had no lice [= no fear],
> Who tasted the good cider [= good cider]
> They wanted to stay here with us.”

For with their ‘drakkars’ and their horned helmets, they are now an integral an integral of advertising advertising and Norman tourism! However, their image does not evoke the same associations everywhere. In the Nordic countries, the Vikings are the ‘ancestors’ of the Danes, Norwegians and Swedes. In the early 19th century, when, in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars, Denmark, Norway and Sweden had to overcome the trauma of a crisis involving both politics and identity, the

Scandinavian Romantics, drawing on medieval sources, extol their national past and idealise the figure of the Viking, his courage and his thirst for adventure. And despite the more sober and realistic picture painted by historians from the 20th century onwards, the Romantic vision—more or less de-idealised but widely popularised—often still prevails today.

But as it spread beyond the borders of the North, this romantic glorification, through its use of superlatives, soon took on, for some, overtones of superiority leading to racism and xenophobia: in Germany, the Viking warrior was 'enlisted' by the ThirdReich in the service of Nazi propaganda; and in the 21st century, neo-Nazis continue to refer symbolically to the Vikings, runes and Norse mythology, such as the far-right group founded in Finland in 2015, which took the name
'Soldiers of Odin'.

Across the Scandinavian sphere of influence, perceptions of the Vikings vary depending on the place and the period. Today, in France for example, the Bretons are well aware of their atrocities, as in Nantes where, in the cathedral, a large painting from 1852 serves as a reminder that they slaughtered Bishop Gohard there in 843, or in Landévennec where the foundations of the monastery violently attacked in 913 are still visible. And they are well aware that on the island of Groix, during the second half of the 10th century, a Viking chieftain was cremated, along with rich grave goods, in his ship, which was subsequently covered by a burial mound: this burial site, excavated in 1906, is a unique discovery in France. The people of Saintonge know that the Vikings, who sacked Saintes in 845 and 863, may have had a camp near Taillebourg where, in the early 2000s, archaeologists discovered, amongst other things, more than twenty objects of Scandinavian origin at the bottom of the Charente. And Parisians may notice, at the entrance to the archaeological crypt on the Île de la Cité, the plaque commemorating the heroic death of the twelve valiant defenders of the Petit-Pont tower on 6 February 886, facing the Vikings besieging Paris. As for the Normans – some of whom still bear surnames derived from Old Norse, such as Toutain, Anquetil or Turgis – drawing a line under the scale of their misdeeds, they sometimes do not hesitate, rightly or wrongly, to proclaim themselves their proud descendants. This is why they did not fail to celebrate in style the

millennium (in 1911) and the eleventh centenary (in 2011) of the creation of the Duchy of Normandy.

In Shetland, the first islands settled by the Vikings and which remained under Scandinavian rule until their annexation by the Scottish Crown in 1472, it is hardly surprising that Lerwick, every winter, hosts a major folk festival, *Up-Helly-Aa*, which demonstrates – not without a touch of humour – the Shetlanders' genuine attachment to their Viking heritage. As night falls, the procession of hundreds of costumed men (*guizers*) carrying long burning torches and marching behind a replica Viking ship, at the stern of which stands the *'Guizer* Jarl', the Viking chieftain in his winged helmet, brandishing his axe, followed by the sudden blaze of the ship as all the torches are thrown onto it at once – these are the most spectacular images of the festival.

In Spain, by contrast, it is to celebrate the Galicians' resistance to Viking raids that every summer, not far from Santiago de Compostela, in Catoira (at the mouth of the River Ulla), another popular festival takes place: the *Romería Vikinga* – which re-enacts (without any historical accuracy) a repelled Viking landing. Indeed, the Iberian Peninsula was not spared. The two well-documented raids of the 9th century, which first affected Asturias and Galicia, led the Vikings as far as *al-Andalus*: in 844, they pillaged Lisbon and Cádiz, then seized Seville, but were ultimately put to flight by the emir Abd al-Rahman II. And in 859, after being driven from the mouth of the Guadalquivir by Emir

Muhammad I, they crossed the Strait of Gibraltar, ravaged Murcia and went on to plunder the Balearic Islands. After a voyage across the Mediterranean, they returned in 861 to the Strait of Gibraltar, where they suffered further losses.

Aware of the defensive capabilities of the emirs of Córdoba, it was not until almost a century later that they returned, but this time their main targets were the Christian kingdoms of northern Spain. Galicia suffered several attacks between 951 and 972. In 968, the Vikings routed the Galician forces and killed the Bishop of Santiago de Compostela; they set up camp on the River Ulla and pillaged the interior of the country for two or three years. There were also a few incursions further south, towards Lisbon and as far as the Algarve coast, but the Muslim fleets kept a close watch. One of the last expeditions to Galicia was led in 1013 by the

future King of Norway, Óláfr Haraldsson, as far as the mouth of the Miño, where they stormed Tui, captured the bishop and completely ravaged the city.

There are few traces left of the Vikings on the Iberian Peninsula, but written sources and rare place names suggest a few temporary settlements in the north. Only a small cylindrical box made of whale bone, decorated with Scandinavian animal motifs from the early 11th century—and likely reused as a reliquary—is preserved in the treasury of the Royal Collegiate Church of San Isidoro (León), though its provenance remains unknown.

In the United States, when it emerged in the 19th century that the Vikings had discovered America (*Vinland*) long before Christopher Columbus, a passionate search for material evidence began – which sometimes descended into fraud: a fake runic inscription on a stone found in 1898 in Kensington, Minnesota, recounting an exploratory voyage by
'Gots' (Swedes) and Norwegians to *Vinland* in 1362, but in which neither the language nor some of the runes used correspond to that period; and a forged map of *Vinland*, bound together with *the Historia Tartarorum* (an account of a journey to the Mongols in 1245–1247) in a small 15th-century manuscript now owned by Yale University, but which immediately aroused the suspicion of many researchers as it must have been produced only in the 20th century (on genuine vellum).

Henry Longfellow composed his famous poem *'The Skeleton in* Armour' in 1841, inspired by the mysterious skeleton of a warrior discovered in 1832 in Fall River (Massachusetts), which some at the time believed to be that of a Viking. Several statues, including the one in Boston in 1887, were erected in memory of Leifr Eiríksson, and Wisconsin was the first state to establish a *Leif Erikson Day*, setting the date as 9 October (which actually corresponds to the arrival of the first Norwegian immigrants in 1825). The US Congress made it a federal holiday in 1964, but it is the states of the northern Midwest, with their large populations of Nordic origin, that celebrate it most enthusiastically: a first rival to *Columbus Day*, officially observed on the second Monday in October, which today more and more cities, and even states, are tending to replace with an *Indigenous Peoples' Day* commemorating their history and culture.

In Russia, the situation is very different: the focus is on a never-ending ideological dispute concerning the origins of the Russian state and its name.

It all began in the mid-18th century. Two German historians argued that the Varangians (or Rus', mentioned notably in the *Tale of Bygone Years*, also known *as Nestor's Chronicle*) were Scandinavians and that they played a significant role in the origins of Russia: this was immediately refuted by Russian scholars, who maintained that the Varangians were Western Slavs. This debate continued into the 19th century, but this time amongst Russian historians: those described as 'Normanists' continued to assert that Russia owed its political and social rise to the Scandinavians, whilst the 'anti-Normanists' considered that the Slavs themselves were the driving force behind its establishment and development. In the 20th century, anti-Normannism was the norm under the Soviet regime and any dissent could be severely punished; yet it was during this period that excavations undertaken by archaeologists, including at the sites of Riurikuvo Gorodichtche (near Novgorod) and Staraya Ladoga (in northern Russia), began to accumulate evidence of the presence of a Scandinavian elite amongst the local populations in the 9th and 10th centuries.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, ideological constraints eased, but anti-Norman sentiment did not disappear completely and still seeks, even today, to promote the Russian nation and its history to the exclusion of all others.

The fact remains that no corner of the globe is now immune to the widespread fascination with the Vikings, who have thus gained incredible popularity everywhere.

Literature has played a major part in this. Perhaps the most notable Viking adventure novel of the 20th century is perhaps **Röde Orm** (*Red Orm*) by the Swede Frans Gunnar Bengtsson, published in two volumes in 1941 and 1945, translated into some twenty languages and reprinted many times. In this vivid tale, the author depicts the tumultuous life and values attributed to the Vikings with a certain realism, yet he seeks neither to idealise them nor to denounce their barbarism; he simply employs a fair

dose of humour. In addition to historical novels, there are also numerous *fantasy* tales inspired by the Vikings or their mythology, whether reinterpreted or entirely reworked, or even as has masterfully done
J. R. R. Tolkien to create his own universe, combined with other sources of inspiration.

The comic book happily follows in the footsteps of the novels and also oscillates between realism, fantasy and humour. Among English-language *comics*, notable examples include *Prince Valiant*, created by the Canadian Harold Foster in 1937, *Karl the Viking* (1961–1968) by the English artist Don Lawrence, and *Hägar the Horrible*, created by the American Dick Browne in 1973 (known in French as *Hägar Dünor*). French-language titles include the Belgian bestseller *Thorgal*, created in 1977 by scriptwriter Jean Van Hamme, and the French series *Aslak* (2011–2019) by Fred Weytens and Hub. And the Vikings fascinate, from Scandinavia – with the fifteen volumes of the Danish series *Valhalla* by Peter Madsen (1979–2009) – to the Far East, with the Korean *manhwa Ragnarok*, created in 1998 by Lee Myung-jin, and the Japanese *manga Vinland Saga* by Makoto Yukimura, which began in 2005 and of which more than 20 volumes have already been published.

On a global scale, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was American cinema that introduced the Vikings to the widest audience. The most famous film of this era is Richard Fleischer's 1958 release, **The Vikings**, in which Kirk Douglas displays the full extent of his talent in the role of Einar. This film is adapted from Edison Marshall's novel, *The Viking* (1951), which itself draws its material from the Icelandic saga dedicated to Ragnar *Lothbrok* and his sons. Since then, there have been dozens of feature films, of very mixed quality, with science fiction and fantasy predominating in the more recent ones. Few stand out for their originality, such as Terry Jones's British slapstick film, *Erik the Viking*, made in 1989.

And two television series are currently enjoying huge success. The first, **Vikings**, by the English director Michael Hirst, premiered in 2013 and ran for six seasons: whilst it strives for a degree of realism in depicting the way of life of the ancient Scandinavians, it makes little distinction between history and legend and suffers from a nonsensical chronology. The second, *The Last Kingdom*, which began in 2015, is an adaptation of Bernard Cornwell's series of historical novels, *The Saxon Stories* (the eleventh volume of which was published in 2018). It features a fictional hero, Uhtred, and, whilst not

strictly historically accurate, it convincingly brings to life the difficult times of Anglo-Saxon resistance against the Vikings and the emergence of the Kingdom of England.

The Vikings have thus become a kind of symbol of Scandinavian identity that is exported all over the world. And they have also invaded… the boundless world of video games. Suffice to say that, in the collective imagination, their stereotypical portrayal continues to disregard historical reality and perpetuates the inevitable clichés that cling to them.

1
Do we know the origin of the word ‘Viking’?

‘In the language of the North, the term *“Viking”* was generally used to refer to those who undertook naval expeditions and lived solely by the sea. Although this term appears to derive from ‘wick’, meaning a cove or harbour suitable for hiding a ship, and consequently *‘Viking’* is synonymous with ‘pirate’, this name was an honourable title, and as such it was inscribed on runestones alongside the names of individuals who had practised piracy during their lifetime. We have seen that the greatest bravery and unwavering daring ennobled this status, which was condemned by the laws of civilised peoples.”

Georges-Bernard DEPPING,
History of the Maritime Expeditions of the Normans, 1826

The word ‘viking’ is either a common noun: a ‘Viking’ (written with or without an initial capital letter), or an adjective: [a ship] ‘viking’. It first appeared in French during the 19th century. Thus Augustin Thierry, in the third edition of his *History of the Conquest of England by the Normans* (1830), writes of the Norwegian king Haraldr *harðráði* (‘the Ruthless’): ‘He had been seen in turn as a pirate and a wandering warrior, *a Viking* and *a Varing*, as they said in the language of the North.’ And Xavier Marmier, fascinated by Erik Geijer’s poem *Vikingen*, translated it from Swedish under the title *Le Viking* and published it in 1842 in *Chants populaires du Nord*. It was, in fact, in that year that the word
‘viking’ made its debut in the *Complément du dictionnaire de l’Académie française*:

> “VIKING, n. A title given to the king’s son among the Scandinavian peoples when he commanded a maritime outpost. Some spell it *‘Vikingue’*.”

Gradually, the word came to supplant the one commonly used since the Middle Ages: ‘Norman’.

Indeed, from the 9th century onwards in Carolingian circles, the texts written in Latin at the time – annals, chronicles or literary works (such as the poem by the monk Abbo on the siege of Paris) – all of which paint a negative picture of the Scandinavians by calling them *barbari* (‘uncultured foreigners’), *piratae* (‘pirates’), *pagani* (‘pagans’), all agreed on the word *Nordmanni* to refer to the ‘men of the North’.

Contemporary observers also used the term *‘Dani’* (literally ‘Danes’), though this did not necessarily imply a specifically Danish origin. However, more precise geographical references can sometimes be found: the *Annals of Saint Bertin* (*Annales Bertiniani*) mention in 839 the presence of *Sueones* (Swedes) with Louis the Pious at Ingelheim, and the *Annals of Angoulême* (*Annales Engolismenses*) indicate that in 843 the sacking of Nantes was the work of the *Westfaldingi*, men from Vestfold (a region on the west coast of *Vík*, the Oslo Fjord). It is also worth noting how Einhard, in the 820s, mentions in his *Life of Charlemagne* (*Vita Karoli Magni*), among the peoples of the Baltic shores, ‘the *Dani* and the *Sueones*, whom we call

Nordmanni'. Adam of Bremen, better informed, would later express his surprise in his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg* (*Gesta Hammaburgensis ecclesiae pontificum*) around 1075, further associating the Latin *piratae* with the Old Norse *víkingar* when he refers to 'those pirates whom they call there [= in Denmark] *Wichingos* (Vikings) but whom we call *Ascomannos* (Ascomans)". This name refers to their ash-timber ships (*askr*), a claim refuted by archaeology: they were built of oak and pine.

The use of the word *Nordmanni* (also spelled *Nortmanni* or *Normanni*), understood by all, spread across much of Western Europe. However, other linguistic conventions developed locally. In England, the Latin *pagani* or *gentiles* became *hæðene* ('pagans') in Old English texts, where this word appears alongside *scipmen, sceigðmen, æskmen* and *flotmen*, all of which refer to the Viking seafarers. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* (written in Old English), for its part, frequently mentions the *Dene*, and these are indeed the Danes.

In Ireland, annalists and chroniclers also viewed the Vikings as pagans (*geinti* in Gaelic), but above all as 'foreigners' (*gaill* in Gaelic). They even distinguished between the Norwegians and the Danes, calling them *Finngaill* and *Dubgaill* respectively (literally
'the white foreigners' and 'the black foreigners'). However, *finn* and *dub* were probably not originally understood in this sense of colour, but perhaps in relation to the chronology of their arrival in Ireland, the
The 'whites' were the first to arrive, with the 'blacks' arriving from 850 onwards.

In Wales, chroniclers are not as categorical as their Irish contemporaries regarding the origin of the Vikings who came to harass their coasts. Whatever the Welsh term used to describe them, they are all 'black' – such *as y llu du* ('the black army') or *y kenedloedd duon* ('the black pagans').

Finally, in Muslim Spain, it was also their paganism (sorcerers, fire-worshippers?) that earned them the name *al-Majūs* (Frenchified as Madjous), which Arab chroniclers mention, readily adding the phrase 'May Allah curse them!'.

But what are the origin and meaning of the word 'Viking'?

In England, in a glossary dating from the late 7th century, the Latin word *piraticam* (piracy) is translated into Old English as *wīcingsceaðan*.

Sceaða means ‘crime’ or ‘theft’: it is therefore indeed the work of *the wīcing*, the pirate. A 9th-century Old English translation of Orosius’s *Historiae adversus paganos* (*Histories against the Pagans*) uses the word *wīcing* to refer to pirates in the Mediterranean. Preserved in the *Exeter Book*, a manuscript from the late 10th century, the Old English poem *Widsið*, possibly composed as early as the 7th century, refers, in a list of peoples, to the *wīcingum* and the *wīcinga cynn* (‘tribe of the Vikings’).

It is Ælfric of Eynsham’s *Grammar*, from the late 10th century, which shows that by this time the word *wīcing* was associated with the Scandinavian pirate: *wīcing vel scegðman*. Curiously, the word appears only five times in the entire *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. But it features prominently in *The Battle of Maldon*, another Old English poem whose subject is precisely this battle fought in 991 at Maldon, in Essex, where the Vikings defeated the Anglo-Saxons.

Furthermore, in several Old Frisian legal texts, dating from around 1100, we find the equivalent: *wītsing*, a word denoting a pirate, often qualified by the term *‘north*’: the ‘Nordic pirate’.

It would appear that the word *‘wīcing’* was originally a generic term for a pirate or marauder, and that later, in Anglo-Saxon sources from the Viking Age, it came to refer more specifically – amongst other terms – to a Scandinavian warrior.

In Old Norse, there are two nouns: the first, *víking* (feminine), refers to a naval expedition, a Viking raid; the second, *víkingr* (masculine; plural: *víkingar*), refers to a man taking part in such an expedition. During the Viking Age, the language was scarcely written down – except, exceptionally, under the hammer of the runic carvers. The feminine noun is attested three times: on the runestones at Västra Strö and Gårdstånga (Skåne) and that at Härlingstorp (Västergötland), erected for a brother, companions or a son who had met his death <**i uikiku**>, ‘during a Viking raid’. The masculine form also occurs three times in the plural: in Denmark on the Tirsted stone (Lolland) – <**aliR uikikar**>, ‘all the Vikings’ –; in Sweden on the Hablingbo stone (Gotland) – <**istr farin miþ uikikum**>, ‘departed westwards with Vikings’ – and the Bro (Uppland) – <**uikika uaurþr**>, ‘Viking watchman’. It also appears in the singular on around fifteen stones, once probably as a nickname: on the Växsjö stone (Småland) – <**uikikr tyki**>, ‘Toki, the Viking’ –, and otherwise

used as a proper name – <**uikikr**>, 'Víkingr', a personal name with positive connotations.

In their poems, which were composed orally, the skalds made relatively little use of the word 'Viking'. The earliest occurrence of the feminine noun appears in a stanza of Markús Skeggjason's *Eiríksdrápa* (shortly after 1100), where the Danish king Eiríkr 'resolutely put an end to the Viking expedition' against the Wends. And the masculine noun, attested in a dozen stanzas (from the late 10th century to the turn of the 12th), is always used in the plural. The *víkingar* in question may refer just as easily to the enemies of the Scandinavians as to their own warriors. Thus the skald Sigvatr Þórðarson uses the word in three of his stanzas entitled *Víkingavísur* (*Stanzas of the Viking Raids*), circa 1014–1015, in honour of the future Norwegian king Óláfr Haraldsson who had set out to wage war: in the first,
'the longboats of the Vikings [*víkinga skeiðar*]' are indeed those of his men; in the second, during the capture of *Hóll* (Dol, in Brittany) where
'the Vikings held [*víkingar áttu*]', these are the local adversaries; and in the third, during the attack on London, it is difficult to decide. A century later, the skald Halldórr *skvaldri* ('the Chatterbox'), in his poem *Útfarardrápa*, describes as 'ignoble Vikings [*fádýrir víkingar*]' the Moors faced in 1108 in the Mediterranean by the fleet of the Norwegian king Sigurðr *Jórsalafari* ('the Crusader') sailing towards Jerusalem.

Two or three centuries after the Viking Age, the word 'Viking' appears frequently in Old Norse prose texts – particularly in the numerous sagas, most of which were written in Iceland during the 13th and 14th centuries. It often refers to naval expeditions led by this or that warrior – be it a ruler, as in the *Magnúss saga berfœtts* (*Saga of Magnús the Barefoot*): 'King Magnús returned from his Viking expedition to the west [*ór vestrvíking*]'; or a chieftain, as in the *Færeyinga saga* (*Saga of the Faroese*): 'Sigmundr said that he preferred to go on a Viking expedition [*fara í víking*] and find either glory or death.'

When these texts describe a man as a 'great Viking [*víkingr mikill*]', the notion of prestige generally fades into the background; what remains is simply the notion of the activities commonly attributed to him. A pejorative connotation even prevails very often: this is particularly the case in the plural, where the word tends to refer to bandits or unwelcome pirates, whether they are Scandinavian, such as those Vikings harassing the coasts of Norway from the Orkney Islands (*Haralds saga hárfagra*), or of any other ethnic origin: 'as they were sailing

eastwards, Vikings [*víkingar*] attacked them; they were Estonians" (*Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*).

Was the word 'Viking' coined in England or in Scandinavia? Its etymology remains a mystery: there is no shortage of the most diverse hypotheses, but none is absolutely certain.

Some, who argue that *'víking'* and *'víkingr'* have a purely Scandinavian origin, see a connection with the noun *'vík'* ('a bay') or *Vík* (the Oslo Fjord), from where they set sail; others see it as a derivation of the verb *víkja* ('to travel', 'to move', or 'to turn') or the noun *vika* ('distance at sea', originally the distance a rower could cover between two breaks).

As for the Anglo-Saxon word *wīcing*, it is primarily associated with a Germanisation of *the* Latin *vicus* ('port, trading post'): *wīc*, which is found in compound place names such as *Eoforwīc* (York) or Quentovic, and also with the meaning of camp or temporary encampment in Old English.

It is not impossible that the word *wīcing* was borrowed by the Scandinavians, giving rise to the two forms: *víking* and its derivative *víkingr*. But it is also not impossible that a common form originally existed, referring to the raiders who landed on all the shores of the North Sea – and this long before the time when the Norwegians and Danes themselves suddenly intensified the practice. However, it is difficult to judge this in the absence of written sources from the 8th century in Scandinavia, unlike in England.

What is certain, however, is that by the end of the Middle Ages the word had fallen into disuse (except perhaps in Iceland) and did not reappear in Scandinavia until Renaissance historians began to examine the Old Norse written sources that needed translating. Then, from the early 19th century, Swedish Romantic poets (led by Erik Geijer and Esaias Tegnér) revived the word 'viking' in everyday language, but to refer exclusively to a Scandinavian adventurer. Subsequently, the Norwegian historian
P. A. Munch (in 1851) and the Danish archaeologist J. J. Worsaae (in 1863) associated the word 'Viking' with a period of history – 'the Viking Age' – a concept that became widely popular in the 20th century.

In France, for a long time, scholars referred to the ancient Scandinavians using the same terms as their 9th-century victims:

barbarians, pirates, pagans and, more specifically, Normans. Abbé Du Moulin, in his *Histoire générale de Normandie* (General History of Normandy), published in 1631, wrote of them:

> "These Norman pirates spread out everywhere like swarms of flies."

The first major work in French devoted to them, by Georges-Bernard Depping in 1826, is entitled *Histoire des expéditions maritimes des Normands* (*History of* the Maritime Expeditions of the Normans). And many people continued to speak of the 'Normans' and 'Norman invasions' right up until the mid-20th century.

But the word 'Viking' eventually prevailed, and the confusion with the Normans… of Normandy ceased.

Since the 20th century, the word 'Viking' has also been given a much broader meaning than its original one. Vikings now also refer to the entire Scandinavian population living from the late 8th century to the mid-11th century – that is, the period during which Viking expeditions were carried out across the seas. The adjective therefore applies just as much to the 'Viking warrior' who set sail on his ship (*in the strict sense*) as to the 'Viking woman' who remained at home (in the broader sense). This is why we speak of 'Viking art' or 'Viking cuisine' or even 'the Viking language', without giving a thought to either the etymology or the original meaning. This is a convenient misuse of language… but one that gives rise to further confusion.

2
Do the Vikings themselves tell their own story?

> 'We place the greatest trust in the content of the poems that were recited in the presence of the rulers themselves or their sons; we hold as true everything these poems recount concerning their expeditions or their battles.'
>
> Snorri Sturluson, 'Prologue',
> *Heimskringla*, c. 1230

Unfortunately, the information the Vikings themselves have left us amounts to very little: it must be gleaned from runic inscriptions and skaldic poetry, which constitute the two parts of this unique record. Yet although this 'insider's' view remains, by its very nature, fragmentary and incomplete, it is far from insignificant.

Runic writing reached its peak between the 9th and 11th centuries: the 16-character *fuþark*, widely used in Scandinavia where various local graphic variants developed, was exported throughout the Viking expansion zone, from Greenland to Russia. In total, there are now several thousand inscriptions, the majority of which are found in what is now Sweden, particularly in Uppland.

In addition to small objects engraved with runes, there are numerous funerary stelae—upright stone blocks carved for commemorative purposes: to honour the memory of a deceased relative or friend. These inscriptions, sometimes signed by the runic engraver, generally follow the pattern
'X erected this stone in memory of Y' and are often framed by lines serving to guide each line. Most are fairly brief, but some depart from the usual sober formulas and shed direct light on society and history.

The epitaph sometimes includes, in addition, the place or circumstances of death. For example, on the Valleberga stone (Skåne, early 11th century), it is stated that the two deceased 'rest in London'. On the Swedish Esta stone (Södermanland), the following verse is inscribed regarding Sigviðr: "He fell at *Hólmgarðr* (<**i hulmkarþi**>, Novgorod) along with the men of his crew whilst commanding the *skeið* (<**skaiþ**>, warship)." On the Swedish Altuna stone (Uppland, c. 1050), it is written that "both brother and father were burnt": this refers to one of those arson attacks (documented and mentioned in the sagas) intended to burn enemies alive in their homes. And the Fresta stone (Uppland, early 11th century) was erected in memory of Geirbjǫrn:
'The Norwegians killed him on Ásbjǫrn's *knǫrr* (<**o kniri**>, cargo ship)' – no doubt a merchant defending his cargo.

The prestige associated with certain positions is often evident. The Swedish stone at Tuna (Småland) mentions that Assur was 'a member of King Haraldr's retinue'. This may refer to Haraldr *hérafótr* (son of the Danish King Knútr *ríki*), who was King of England from 1037 to 1040. The Danish stone at Glavendrup (Funen, 10th century) was erected in memory of Alli *sǫlvi* ('the pale one'), who was *a 'þegn* (<**þiakn**>, experienced warrior) of high rank in the *lið* (elite troop)'. And Rǫgnvaldr, who had the Ed inscription (Uppland) carved, states that he was, 'in Greece, the leader of the *lið*': in other words, the commander of the Varangian Guard in Constantinople – a prestigious command which the future Norwegian king Haraldr *harðráði* also held.

If a man dies in battle, his valour may be recorded. On the Spånga stone (Södermanland) in memory of Guðmarr, he is described as standing 'valiantly (*drængila*, <**trikila**>) at the bow of the ship. He is buried to the west'. And if a man practises hospitality or shows wisdom, these virtues may be noted. On the Väppeby stone

(Uppland), the deceased combines both: ‘A man generous with food and eloquent.’

In Aspa (Södermanland), Þóra had a stone erected in memory of her husband <**o þik staþi**>, ‘on the site of the *þing* (the local assembly)’. On the Söderby stone (Uppland), now lost, it is written that Sassur, having killed Helgi, “committed a despicable act, betrayed his partner”: the word *niðingsverk* is a legal term, just like *félagi*, a member of an association, the pooling of assets for profit, which is a fundamental institution. And, much older (9th century), a large ring from the church at Forsa (Hälsingland) is engraved with a genuine legal text of nearly 250 runes, concerning the maintenance of a sanctuary (*vé*, <**vi**>).

References to pagan beliefs are often found in the ornamentation of certain stones. One of the panels on the Altuna stone, mentioned above, depicts the myth of Þórr attempting to catch the serpent of Miðgarðr, as recounted in an Eddic poem, the *Hymiskviða* (*Song of Hymir*). The rock slab at Ramsund (Södermanland), which serves as a monument to Sigriðr’s tribute to her father-in-law, is decorated with the myth of Sigurðr, the slayer of the dragon Fáfnir, recounted in another Eddic poem, the *Fáfnismál* (*Songs of Fáfnir*). Not to mention the carved stones erected on the island of Gotland between the early 5th and late 11th centuries, whose appeal lies precisely in their rich iconography: legendary or mythological scenes, whether identifiable or not.

It is sometimes major historical events that are inscribed, such as on the two Danish Jelling stones (Jutland) dating from the 10th century. The smaller one was erected by King Gormr *gamli* (‘the Old’, died 950) in memory of his wife, Þyri. Their son, Haraldr *blátǫnn* (‘Blue-toothed [= black]’), had the second, much more imposing stone erected in memory of his parents; he was the one who ‘conquered all of Denmark and Norway and made the Danes Christians’. This stone bears witness both to the founding of the Danish monarchy and to the first conversion of a Scandinavian country to Christianity.

Another example: more than twenty-five Swedish runestones refer to the daring and ill-fated expedition of Ingvarr *viðfǫrli* (‘the Great Traveller’) to *Serkland*, the Abbasid Caliphate, though they do not specify its purpose. The Icelandic annals confirm the date, 1041, and a legendary 14th-century saga turns it into an epic tale. One of these stones,

that of Stora Rytterne (Västmanland), mentions the death of Slagvi <**austr i karusm**>, 'in the east at Khorezm': he may have been part of the expedition and reached this very distant region, south of the Aral Sea.

But there is also, more modestly engraved (c. 1025) on a silver necklace discovered in Norway on the island of Senja, a reference to a military expedition to Frisia, which could correspond to that of the future King Óláfr Haraldsson mentioned in one of his stanzas by the skald Sigvatr Þórðarson.

For the second aspect of this direct testimony consists of the countless skaldic verses (*vísur*, singular *vísa*), which follow an extremely codified form, characterised, among other things, by alliteration, artificial word order and the use of a wealth of highly elaborate images and metaphors, which were memorised and passed down orally over several generations of skalds.

In the Viking Age, poetry was oral: runic inscriptions bear witness to this practice, as some are partially or entirely alliterative and versified – on stone, such as the complete stanza (eight lines in *dróttkvætt*, the quintessential skaldic metre) on the Swedish Karlevi stone (Öland Island); but also on wood or small objects, such as these two imprecatory verses engraved on an early 11th-century copper balance box found in Sigtuna (Uppland), addressed to a potential thief:

> <**fuhl ualua slait faluon**
> **fonk auk onos auka**>
> 'The bird tore the pale thief to pieces,
> I saw the scavenging cuckoo swell [= the raven].'

However, for purely practical reasons, runes are ill-suited to the composition of long texts: it was not until the 12th and 13th centuries that poems began to be transcribed onto parchment, in Latin script, in medieval Icelandic manuscripts.

Scaldic poetry was initially the work of poets who frequented the courts of the early Norwegian kings: a skald might celebrate any memorable deed (victory or feat) of the prince for whom he composed a poem of praise (*lofkvæði*), or describe a beautiful object (shield, tapestry). The

flokkr is a simple sequence of stanzas, whilst the *drápa* is a much more elaborate poem, specifically dedicated to a prince, containing one or more refrains; and the funeral poem recounting the deeds of the deceased prince is called *an erfidrápa*.

It was in Norway that this form of poetry flourished from the 9th century onwards, particularly during the reign of Haraldr *hárfagri* ('the Fair-Haired'), for a cultured aristocratic audience, before spreading to the Orkney Islands and Iceland. In the 11th century, Icelanders of noble birth possessed sufficient talent to compose an occasional verse (*lausavísa*) on any subject (from simple anecdotes to personal exploits, from romantic sentiments to defamatory remarks) – such as those which the authors of the sagas readily put into the mouths of all manner of characters. In Norway, subsequently, most of the great skalds were, in fact, Icelandic.

King Haraldr *hárfagri* had two skalds: Þjóðólfr of the *Hvínir* and Þorbjǫrn *hornklofi*. The former is the author of *the Ynglingatal* (*Tale of the Ynglings),* which lists the kings of Sweden's ancient dynasty, as well as *Haustlǫng* (*Autumn's Length*), a mythological evocation based on a shield design. The second composed the *Haraldskvæði* (*Poem on Haraldr*), also known as *Hrafnsmál* (*The Raven's Sayings*), which recounts the king's victories as well as life at his court in the late 9th century, and takes the form of a dialogue between a Valkyrie and a raven.

Another great Norwegian skald, Eyvindr Finnsson, nicknamed *skáldaspillir* ('plunderer of skalds') because he was accused of plagiarism, is, among other works, the author of *the Hákonarmál* (*Songs of Hákon*) in memory of King Hákon *góði* ('the Good'), who died around 960. In it, the Valkyries lead the deceased king (who was, however, a Christian) to *Valhalla,* where he is received by the pagan gods, who thank him for having watched over their sanctuaries.

The Icelandic skald Egill Skallagrímsson (910–990) took part in Viking expeditions and fell into the hands of King Eiríkr *Blóðøx* ('Bloodaxe') in York, where he saved his life by composing a *drápa* in his honour during the night, *Hǫfuðlausn* (*Redeeming the Head*). And the most powerful of his poems – unusual, for it is very personal – is the one he composed in his old age following the death of his two sons: *Sonatorrek* (*Loss of Sons*). In it, he accuses Óðinn and Rán (the goddess of the sea) of having taken his sons from him: Óðinn,

god of victory and poetry, has betrayed him, and it is only at the end of the poem that he overcomes his sorrow and reconciles himself with the gods.

Another 10th-century Icelandic skald, Kormákr Ǫgmundarson (935–970), exemplifies a genre rarely cultivated in Iceland: love poetry. As for Sigvatr Þórðarson (995–1045), who was raised in Iceland, he became not only the skald but also the friend and advisor to King Óláfr Haraldsson: we owe to him, for example, the *Víkingavísur*, in which he describes the life of the young Óláfr and his Viking expeditions, and *the Erfidrápa Óláfs helga* (*Funeral Poem in Memory of Saint Óláfr*), in which he recounts the king's final years, his canonisation and his miracles.

Finally, for the 11th century, we should mention the Icelander Arnórr Þórðarson, nicknamed *jarlaskáld* ('skald of *the* jarls') because he lived for a long time in the Orkney Islands and composed a *drápa* about each of the two warring princes, *Jarl* Þorfinnr and *Jarl* Rǫgnvaldr. He also praises King Magnús *góði* in the *Hrynhenda* and King Haraldr *harðráði* in the *Blágagladrápa* (*Poem of the Black Geese*).

These few examples show just how useful skaldic poetry is for our understanding of the Viking Age: it provides details of significant events, battles, historical figures and places, techniques, customs, beliefs and pagan rites. Whilst the great skalds primarily praise their patrons, they do not stoop to crude flattery and remain true to a certain degree of truthfulness.

Doubts do, however, surround the authenticity of certain stanzas. It is true that several centuries often separate the original versions from their written records, but their sophisticated metre has facilitated a fairly faithful transmission. On the other hand, the attribution of a stanza to a particular skald or context by a saga author who refers to it and quotes it in the course of his narrative may be questionable, and this is sometimes obvious. Even more seriously, some authors are suspected of having fabricated themselves, in the 13th or 14th century, the supposedly ancient stanzas on which their texts are based – sometimes justifiably, but not always: those of Kormákr, for example, in the saga dedicated to him (*Kormáks saga*) have been cleared of all suspicion.

Nevertheless, just like the runic inscriptions, the skaldic stanzas have undeniable historical value, especially those preserved in the sagas of the Norwegian kings, which are often corroborated by other sources. Despite the difficulty in grasping their meaning

Because of the complexity of their design, they perfectly capture the world of the Vikings.

3
Were the Vikings merely warriors?

> ‘A man named Loðinn, from the Vík region, wealthy and of good family, was often on trading voyages [*í kaupferðum*] and sometimes on military expeditions [*í hernaði*].’
>
> Snorri Sturluson,
> *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*,
> *Heimskringla*, c. 1230

On 8 June 793, a band of Vikings raided the monastery of Lindisfarne on the north-east coast of England, leaving the Christian West in a state of shock and horror. From the court of Charlemagne, where he served as an advisor, in Aachen, the monk Alcuin, himself a native of Northumbria, wrote in a letter to King Æthelred:

> ‘Never has anyone in Britain [the island] experienced terror comparable to that which we have just suffered at the hands of a pagan race, nor imagined that such an incursion from the sea could be possible. Here is the church of Saint Cuthbert, defiled by the blood of God’s priests, stripped of all its ornaments; this most venerable place in Britain has been delivered into the hands of the pagan peoples.”

The attack on Lindisfarne traditionally marks the beginning of the Viking Age and was the first in a long series: just two years later, Iona Abbey in the Hebrides and the monastery of Inishmurray in Ireland were sacked. It is therefore not surprising that an Irish monk should note in the margin of a manuscript these few verses inspired by the Scandinavian raids:

> 'Tonight the wind is fierce
> And tangles the pale curls of the sea.
> I do not fear that the savage warriors of Lothlend [=
> Norway] Will emerge upon the white water."

In 799, Alcuin, now abbot of Saint-Martin de Tours, wrote in a letter to the Bishop of Salzburg that 'the ships of the pagans caused much mischief in the islands of the ocean in the regions of Aquitaine'. The Frankish Empire was in turn affected.

And everywhere, from the 830s onwards, Viking raids multiplied, not only along the coasts but also, by sailing up rivers, as far inland as the heart of the continent. Religious buildings were always sought-after targets for their precious liturgical furnishings: in Ireland, the Vikings sailed up the Shannon and plundered the monastery of Clonmacnoise in 835; on the continent, they sailed up the Seine and burned down Jumièges Abbey in 841. But the wealth of port cities, whether maritime or riverine, was no less attractive: Dorestad, on the Rhine delta, was attacked and plundered seven times between 834 and 863; Quentovic, at the mouth of the Canche, was ransacked in 842 and part of the population massacred. In 843, the Vikings captured Nantes and departed laden with booty and prisoners. In the following years, they sailed up the Garonne as far as Toulouse and the Adour as far as Tarbes. These are merely a few examples… and this was only the beginning.

Everywhere, the same chorus of lamentations could be heard. In an antiphonary (a collection of liturgical chants) from the second half of the 9th century, we find this invocation: 'From the ferocious Normans who plunder our kingdom, deliver us, Lord!'

In the 9th century, it was the clerics who recorded these events and enabled us to piece together their course: the date of this or that raid, the outcome of this or that battle, the name of this or that chieftain. Their writings vary in quality,

their perspective is that of the victims and often highly biased. But all these documents highlight the violence of the attackers: whether they be annals – such as the *Annals of Saint Bertin* and the *Annals of Ulster* –, chronicles – such as the *Chronicle* of Regino of Prüm and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – or hagiographies – such as *the Life and Miracles of Saint Philibert*. The Vikings were clearly warriors.

Conflicts generally leave few traces in the ground; nevertheless, the evidence of warfare is corroborated by archaeology. For example, excavations around Rouen Cathedral have revealed traces of a violent fire dating from the mid-9th century: ashes and charred pieces of wood, reddish discolouration of the stones, and drops of molten lead from the roof, particularly in what was then the collegiate church of Saint-Étienne, on the north side of the cathedral. Given that at Jumièges Abbey several arches and capitals from the Carolingian period in Saint-Pierre Church also bear traces of fire, it is likely that in both cases this is tangible evidence of the first major Viking expedition on the Seine, led by Ásgeirr in the spring of 841, according to the *Chronicle of Fontenelle* (*Chronicon Fontanellense*).

Conversely, in Scandinavia, at settlement sites and in pagan burial grounds, archaeologists have unearthed what are partly the remains of their plunder – the spoils of their raids, as well as ransoms and other heavy tributes they imposed. These consist not only of large quantities of silver coins, but also, for example, of many precious liturgical objects diverted from their original purpose. Such as the Irish reliquary
from the 8th century, now kept in Copenhagen, stolen by Vikings and taken to Norway, on the underside of which a 10th-century runic inscription reads <**ranvaik a kistu þasa**> ('Rannveig owns this casket'): perhaps this Norwegian noblewoman then used it to store personal items. Or like the fragment of a bishop's crozier (dated to the late 8th century), richly decorated, brought back from northern England and mounted as a piece of jewellery for a woman whose grave was excavated in Romsdal.

The Viking raids were therefore traumatic for everyone
contemporaries. To fear the 'Normans' was like fearing the Hungarians or the Saracens; it was not a fear of honest merchants. Whilst the material damage they caused was significant, the psychological impact was no less so: the image of the barbarian warrior is still

present two centuries later, when Guillaume de Jumièges wrote in his **Gesta Normannorum ducum** that after their passage, 'not even a dog remains to bark at their heels'.

So what of the other image of the Viking that certain historians have deliberately favoured for several decades, at the risk of downplaying the warrior aspect? That of the peaceful merchant, equipped with his portable folding scales, consisting of a lever with a chain at each end supporting a pan. Archaeology has unearthed numerous examples of these in pagan graves, as the Vikings weighed their money, whether in the form of coins, ingots or jewellery.

When, in the summer of 789, the steward of King Beorhtric of Wessex went to meet the crews (Norwegian or Danish) of three ships that had landed on the Dorset coast, apparently with no reason to mistrust them (presumably taking them for merchants), they killed him on the spot. This episode, which appears in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and took place four years before the attack on Lindisfarne, suggests that foreign merchants were in the habit of frequenting the English coast.

Indeed, from the 7th century onwards, the intensification of trade in north-western Europe led to the establishment of Anglo-Saxon trading posts such as *Eoforwīc* (York, in Northumbria), *Lundenwīc* (London, in Mercia) or *Hamwīc* (Southampton, in Wessex), whilst on the continent Quentovic and Dorestad grew significantly. Frisian merchants were the most assiduous in sailing to Scandinavia to offer luxury goods, glassware, pottery and wine in exchange for Nordic products such as furs, walrus ivory and amber – which led the Scandinavian elite to establish trading posts of their own, such as Ribe (founded around 710 on the west coast of Jutland) in Denmark and Birka (around 750 on Lake Mälar) in Sweden, followed by Kaupang (*Skíringsalr*) in Norway, and Hedeby, on the other side of the Jutland peninsula (in the first decade of the 9th century). What is more, during the 8th century, the Danes and Swedes also established trading posts along the southern shores of the Baltic Sea and as far as the Gulf of Finland. All these trading posts also benefited local trade and attracted many craftsmen.

It is clear that, initially, Viking raids disrupted trade with the rest of Europe as much as they did the existing religious structures and political powers.

Nevertheless, predation and trade are not as contradictory as they might seem. Indeed, the Norse texts themselves make a clear distinction between the two. *The Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, for example, a saga dedicated to the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason (995–1000), cites several cases, such as that of Þórir *klakka* who 'was sometimes on a Viking expedition [*var stundom í víking*], sometimes on a trading voyage [*stundom í kaupferðum*] '. Or again, *the Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* (a saga from the early 13th century, set in the 10th century) explains that Egill and his companion Þórólfr, 'when summer came, set out for the East, pillaging, amassing booty and fighting many battles; then they reached Courland, where they stayed for a fortnight trading in peace, before resuming their ravaging".

It is therefore often the same people who wage war on one side and trade on the other, and sometimes do both during the course of a single expedition. After all, the principle is the same: an association (*félag*) whose members then share the profits; and the aim is also the same: to enrich themselves (*afla sér fjár*, 'to acquire wealth', according to the established Old Norse expression).

Furthermore, the slave trade, which was particularly lucrative, inevitably stemmed from predatory activity. During their raids, they had no qualms about capturing men and women and loading them onto their ships to sell them at slave markets.

The raids did not prevent trade. In 873, King Charles the Bald authorised the Vikings settled in Nantes, on the island of Bièce, to establish a market (*portus*) there. In the same year, according to the *Annals of Fulda* (*Annales Fuldenses*), envoys of the Danish king Sigfriðr (*Sigifridus*) travelled to Louis the German at Bürstadt, near Worms, to secure permission for merchants (*negociatores*) to travel from one kingdom to another with their goods and 'buy or sell in peace'.

And there are two contemporary accounts by merchant-navigators from the late 9th century, recorded in the Old English translation of Orosius's *Histories Against the Pagans*: those of Ohthere and Wulfstan. The first is Óttarr, a chieftain from Hålogaland in northern Norway, who in the 890s was received at the court of King Alfred of Wessex. He is introduced in these terms:

> ‘He lived,’ he said, ‘in the north of the country along the Norwegian coast. He said, however, that this country stretched far to the north of there. But all of it is uninhabited except for a few places here and there, where the Lapps set up their camps, hunting in winter and fishing in the sea in summer.’

He hunts whales and ploughs his land with horses. He keeps domestic animals and a large herd of reindeer; and he levies a tribute of skins and furs from the nomadic Sami. He then recounts his travels. He has explored the Far North and reached the White Sea in search of walrus ivory, and he has travelled to Kaupang and Hedeby to sell his precious goods.

The second, Wulfstan, whose identity is not clearly established, describes a journey from Hedeby to Truso (now in Poland, the site of Janów Pomorski, near Elbląg). Neither of them has any concerns with warfare or plunder, at the heart of the Viking Age.

The Viking who plunders, kills and burns (the *víkingr* in the original sense of the word) crosses paths with the ‘peaceful Viking’ – or, more accurately, the Scandinavian merchant – on the same sea routes. There is no doubt that the Scandinavians, at that time, engaged in both types of activity – and that trade flourished after the 9th century, once conditions had become more favourable.

4
Are the Varangians and the Rus' Vikings?

> "The Scandinavians thus approached the West as pirates (Vikings) and the East as merchants (Varangians): this etymological framework, however simplistic it may be, clearly illustrates the dual nature of this great migratory movement."
>
> Lucien MUSSET, *The Scandinavian Peoples in the Middle Ages*, 1951

It has become customary to refer to the Scandinavians who took the eastern sea route as "Varangians" and to those
'Rus' those who, more specifically, were responsible for the founding of ancient Russia.

The word 'Varangian' derives from the Old Norse *væringi* (attested in the 10th century), likely derived from the word *várar*, meaning 'oath' – in this case, an oath of loyalty, the bond that tied the warriors to one another and to their leader. The *væringjar* were Scandinavians enlisted as mercenaries in the famous Varangian Guard (*væringjalið*), the personal guard of the Byzantine emperors – which is mentioned in several Icelandic sagas. The word is also used in this sense in French. A 13th-century saga of knights, the *Þiðriks saga af Bern* (*Saga of Theodoric of Verona*), is the

only one in which the word *væringjar* refers more generally to Scandinavians. Elsewhere, however, in Norse sources, the established expression is: *fara í austrveg*, sometimes more specifically *fara í víking í austrveg*, 'to set out (on an expedition) on the Eastern Route' – as opposed to *fara í víking* or *í vestr-víking* ('on the Western Route').

The word 'Rus', used as early as the 9th century in Arabic and Byzantine sources, may derive from the Finnish word *Ruotsi* ('Sweden') and, more specifically, from the coastal region of Uppland, formerly known as *Roden*: this name is likely derived from *the* Old Norse *róðr*, meaning 'rowing' '. Today, this is Roslagen, probably the point of departure for the Rus'. In Russian sources, the word *varjagi* ('Varangian') is used to refer to Scandinavians who came temporarily (warriors, mercenaries, merchants), whereas the word *Rus'* refers to those Swedes whose elite, by gradually assimilating with the Slavs, came to rule the new state bearing their name: *Rus'*, Russia.

In Old Norse, this vast territory was first known as *Garðar* in the plural – the singular *garðr* meaning 'stronghold' – a name attested in a few 11th-century skaldic stanzas and runic inscriptions; then, from the 13th century onwards, it became in Old Norse literature: *Garðaríki*, 'the realm of fortified cities', as if to acknowledge its status as a state. These numerous walled towns were clearly distinctive, since in his **De administrando imperio** (**On the Administration of the Empire**), written around 950, the Byzantine emperor Constantine VII used the word **kastron** ('fortress', in Greek) to refer to them.

The Scandinavians were present on the southern shores of the Baltic Sea well before the 'traditional' Viking Age – the period which, in the West, began abruptly shortly before the year 800 and is characterised primarily by military expeditions. Archaeology has revealed the existence of a small community originating from Svealand (central Sweden) and the island of Gotland, as early as the mid-7th century, on the Curonian coast at Grobiņa, now in Latvia. Other sites dedicated to trade and craftsmanship developed thanks to the Scandinavians during the 8th century (such as Ralswiek, on the island of Rügen, or Apuolé, on the Luoba River, in present-day Lithuania). And at Salme, on the Estonian island of Saaremaa, two ships from

war ships have been discovered: likely originating from the Lake Mälaren region, they served as burial sites for their own crews, who met a violent death around 750. It was during this period that the Swedes explored the Gulf of Finland and the waterways leading into the territories inhabited by the Finns, sailed up the Neva, reached Lake Ladoga, and shortly afterwards found a suitable place to settle permanently at the mouth of the Volkhov. The Icelandic sagas refer to it as *Aldeigjuborg* (*Aldeigja* derives from the Finnish name **Alode-joki*, 'low river'). The Slavs would later give this place the name Staraia Ladoga ('Old Ladoga'), but at that time, in their advance northwards, they had barely reached the upper Dnieper valley. Conversely, during the second half of the 8th century, the Scandinavians continued their exploration of the great rivers.

At the beginning of the 9th century, various routes gradually began to take shape. One led to the Volga from Lake Ladoga and crossed the territories of the Bulgars and the Khazars to reach the Caspian Sea, or, via the Don, the Sea of Azov. Another – later known as 'the Varangian Route to the Greeks' – reached the Dnieper, either from Lake Ladoga or by travelling up the Neman, and led to the Black Sea, eventually reaching Constantinople (which the Scandinavians called *Miklagarðr*). Yet another route reached the Dniester by travelling up the Vistula and also led to the Black Sea. None of these routes was, of course, an easy one. They sailed in relatively small boats, about ten metres long, with a shallow draught, which could serve both as small warships and as transport vessels. Portage or the use of sledges proved necessary, sometimes to cross from one river to another, sometimes to bypass a series of impassable rapids.

The Persian geographer Ibn Khurradādhbih, in his **Book of Roads and Provinces** (**Kitāb al-masālik wa'l-mamālik**), reports in the 840s that the Scandinavians – whom he calls *ar-Rūs* – reached both the shores of the Black Sea and those of the Caspian Sea via the Don and the Volga, and sometimes transported their goods by camel from Gorgān to Baghdad.

The existence of these Rus' is mentioned in 839 by the *Annals of Saint-Bertin*, the first Western written source to allude to the Viking expansion eastwards: Louis the Pious received 'a few men who claimed to be *called* Rhos' and discovered, after investigation, that they were Swedes (*Sueones*). In the 840s and 850s, the Rus' constituted a

distinctly identifiable ethnic group, which the Arab historian and geographer Aḥmad al-Yaʿqūbī, in his *Book of Countries* (*Kitāb al-buldān*) in 889, described as being of the same race as the Magi (*al-Majūs*) who attacked Seville in 844. And around 960, Bishop Liudprand of Cremona explains, in his *Antapodosis*, that those whom 'the Greeks call *Rúsios*, we call *Nordmanni* because of their geographical origin'.

Does this mean that trade was the Varangians' sole motivation, as suggested by another etymology of *'væringi'* considered by some— , who , , and see a possible derivation from the Old Norse word *'vara*', 'merchandise'? According to the *Life of Saint Anskari* (*Vita Anskarii*), written by Archbishop Rimbert around 870, a Swedish king ruling from Birka, Óláfr, led a military expedition to the coast of Courland and imposed a tribute on the Chori shortly before 860. When the monk Nestor set about compiling his chronicle, The *Tale of Bygone Years* (*Povest' vremennykh let*), in the early 12th century, he wrote that in 859 'the Varangians from across the sea' (in other words, the Scandinavians) were receiving tribute from the peoples of the north of what would become Russia. Arab and Persian sources also indicate that the Rus' launched expeditions against the Slavs and subsequently sold their prisoners as slaves, and that, upon reaching the regions of the Caspian or Black Sea, they proved just as aggressive as they had been in the West.

New settlements began to appear in the first half of the 9th century, at the point where the Volkhov flows out of Lake Ilmen, the site of *Hólmgarðr*, that is to say Gorodichtche, later known as Riurikuvo Gorodichtche ('Rurik's Old Town') – on the hills near which the 'new town', Novgorod, would develop around the middle of the 10th century. And much further south, the banks of the Dnieper saw the first settlements.

In his *Tale of Bygone Years*, the monk Nestor recounts that, around 860, the northern peoples, who were tributaries of the Varangians, drove them beyond the sea, but, unable to govern themselves, decided to seek out – "among the Varangians, among the Rus'; for these Varangians were called Rus'" – a prince capable of taking control of the situation. This is the famous "Call to the Varangians" (which Scandinavian sources, incidentally, make no mention of whatsoever):

> "Our land is vast and rich, but there is no order amongst us. Come and govern us and reign over us!"

Thus, three brothers were chosen to undertake this task and put an end to the internal strife: Rurik (*Hrœrekr*), Sineus (*Signjótr*) and Truvor (*Þorvarðr*).

In the view of historians, this is a legend. But it may conceal a certain reality, for this is not the only example of a reliance on Viking leaders at that time: there is notably the case in Frisia, between the years 830 and 880, where the Carolingians dealt successively with Haraldr, another Hrœrekr and Guðfriðr.

In the north of what would become Russia, each of the three brothers was entrusted with the administration of a territory, over which they may already have exercised some control in the past. Sineus was put in charge of the Veps domain and settled at Beloozero, on the southern shore of Lake Beloye. Truvor was given the domain of the Chuds (also Finns) and took up position at Izborsk, on a small tributary of Lake Pskov. As for the eldest of the three, Rurik, depending on which manuscript of *the Tale of Bygone Years* one consults, he settled either at *Aldeigjuborg* / Ladoga (and subsequently at *Hólmgarðr* after the death of his brothers two years later), or directly at *Hólmgarðr /* Gorodichtche. And Nestor writes:

'It is from these Varangians that the country came to be called Rus', and that the people of Novgorod are said to be of Varangian stock, whereas previously they were Slavs.'

In his view, the Rus' are indeed Varangians.

Rurik made *Hólmgarðr* his capital in 862, and whilst the legitimacy of his accession is disputed, as is the date itself, the growing Scandinavian presence in the second half of the 9th century and the construction of wooden fortifications to reinforce the natural defences suggest the site's new military role, alongside its existing focus on trade and craftsmanship.

In June 860, the Varangians launched a major military expedition into the Black Sea and threatened Constantinople. The event is recorded in various Byzantine sources, as well as in the **Chronicle of Bygone Times**, which, whilst getting the date wrong, identifies two other Varangian leaders at the head of this expedition: Askold (*Hǫskuldr*) and Dir (*Dýri*), who were settled on the Dnieper, on the outskirts of Kiev (*Kænugarðr*), now the capital of Ukraine. We know no more about them than we do about Rurik, save for what Nestor tells us of their deaths during an

ambush set by Oleg in 882, if we follow the traditional chronology. This Oleg (*Helgi*), soon nicknamed 'the Wise', was a member of Rurik's family: after assuming, upon Rurik's death in 879, the regency at *Hólmgarðr* and guardianship of his young son, Igor (*Ingvarr*), he made Kiev the capital of the nascent Rurikid dynasty. Or as Nestor writes: 'He proclaimed himself prince in Kiev, declaring that it would be the mother of the Rus' cities.'

Oleg levied tribute from the various peoples under his rule, repelled raids by steppe nomads, and succeeded in concluding a treaty with the Byzantines in 911, a treaty that granted Rus' merchants favourable terms for trading with Byzantium and legalised the recruitment of Rus' into the imperial army, either temporarily for a war or military expedition, or even permanently even in peacetime. The presence of Scandinavian mercenaries is attested from the early 10th century in various Byzantine sources, which use the Greek word *Baraggoi* (Varangians) to refer to them. Towards the end of the century, Emperor Basil II decided to bring together these troops, numbering several thousand men, and form them into a particularly renowned elite unit, soon known as the 'Varangian Guard'.

Igor, who succeeded Oleg in 912, continued his expansionist policy, and his widow, Olga (*Helga*), reigned over Rus' until Prince Sviatoslav came of age – the first to bear a Slavic name, a sign of the gradual acculturation of the Varangian elite.

The Varangians were indeed the Vikings of the East. Their often overly emphasised image as peaceful merchants was, of course, matched by that of warriors. In his *Book of the Experiences of Nations* (*Kitāb tajārib al-uman*), the 10th-century Iranian philosopher and historian Ibn Miskawayh, before recounting the attack on Barda'a – then the prosperous capital of Arrān (in the Caucasus) – by the Rus' in 943, gives this description of them:

> "They are naturally strong and extremely brave. They know no defeat, and none of them turns his back until he has been killed or has killed someone himself. […] A Rus' fights with a spear and a shield, and carries a sword hanging at his side in its scabbard."

And in his *Risāla*, Ibn Faḍlān, sent on a diplomatic mission to the King of the Volga Bulgars in 922, describes their equipment as follows:
“Each of them has an axe, a sword and a knife, and keeps them within reach at all times” – he then notes that they transport a large number of slaves for sale, many of whom are women. Moreover, the Russo-Byzantine treaty of 907 stipulates, among other things, that Rus’ merchants must lay down their weapons before entering Constantinople.

Whilst there may be fewer monasteries to plunder along the eastern routes, there is no shortage of opportunities to amass wealth. The major waterways provide access to the riches of the Muslim and Byzantine worlds, and amber, furs and the slave trade (which also relies on the use of arms) are a considerable source of income. Not content with waging war and trading, and whilst remaining a very small minority, the Varangians were able to control territories stretching practically from the Gulf of Finland to the shores of the Black Sea.

5
Did the Vikings set out out of necessity?

> 'Poverty forced them to travel the world, from whence they brought back riches acquired during their piratical voyages to compensate for the barrenness of their own land.'
>
> Adam of Bremen,
> *Gesta Hammaburgensis*, c. 1075

In his *History of the Goths* (*Getica*), written in Latin around 550, Jordanes, an Ostrogoth by birth, presents Scandinavia (*Scandza*) as
'the crucible of peoples or the cradle of nations', in reference to the great Germanic migrations of the early centuries AD. This is obviously not a reference to the Vikings, but to the image of an overpopulated Scandinavia spilling out hordes of invaders.

Historians have suggested a cooling period that would have reduced habitable land and made agricultural production insufficient to feed the population. However, studies of glacial movements do not support this hypothesis, and archaeologists have found no evidence of malnutrition or famine in graves from the 8th and 9th centuries.

Conversely, others have suggested a warming trend that would have favoured crops… and a population boom. Indeed, from the 8th century onwards,

wheat cultivation began to develop in southern Scandinavia – a development likely attributable to the climate. Crops were grown more successfully, on more land… but not to the extent of creating demographic pressure that would inevitably encourage emigration. In reality, vast tracts of land lay waiting to be cleared, except perhaps in certain regions of the west coast of Norway, where the soil was poor or access difficult: this would help explain the arrival of the first Norwegians on the northern islands of Scotland as early as the late 8th century – an event overlooked in Norse texts but confirmed by archaeology in Shetland – simple peasants in search of new land, who managed to find on these islands, with a fair wind less than two days' sail away, the means to continue their usual activities with their families.

It would appear that the Scandinavian population, which is difficult to estimate, was constantly increasing at that time, and that whilst there was no overpopulation, this population was nevertheless able to sustain or compensate for the number of departures. Throughout the first half of the In the 9th century, the Vikings undertook their raids during the warmer months and returned home for the winter. But later on, men—and even entire families—set out to settle in places such as England and Iceland.

At the beginning of the 11th century, the canon Dudon of Saint-Quentin added, in an apparently scandalised tone, in his *History of the Normans* (*Historia Normannorum*, published under the title *De moribus et actis primorum Normanniae ducum*):

> 'These shameless people live in excess, share their lives with several women and, through these shameless and unlawful relationships, father countless offspring. When they come of age, the young men fight fiercely for their inheritance, against their fathers, grandfathers and amongst themselves, and as they become too numerous, they are unable to secure sufficient land for their subsistence."

Admittedly, polygamy—which allows a man to legally have one or more concubines in addition to his lawful wife—can result in large families. And inheritance laws, under which a single heir, usually the eldest son, receives the family estate, disadvantage the others by depriving them of

land: some of them will willingly take part in military expeditions rather than stay and work on the farm.

But other reasons are also cited. The punishments meted out for unforgivable crimes—temporary banishment or permanent exile, which turns the condemned man into an outlaw, leaving his property and life at the mercy of anyone and everyone—undoubtedly force more than a few to try their luck across the seas.

And the love of martial exploits which, moreover, if it ends in death in battle, weapons in hand, offers the prospect of a place in *Valhǫll* (Óðinn's hall) – though the financial aspect is surely paramount – is celebrated in the Icelandic sagas and attested in the oldest runic inscriptions, such as that on the Swedish stone in Södermanland, at Kjula: 'He had gone west, he had attacked and conquered fortresses.'

Social change gathered pace at the beginning of the 8th century. The Scandinavian peasant, on his farm, is a *bóndi* – in other words, a free man with the right to bear arms – but not all *bændr* are in the same boat. Whilst most own the land they farm, only the wealthiest among them enjoy greater rights and privileges and continue to increase their influence. These were the local chieftains, at the head of large estates, whose social standing was bolstered by their religious functions; they lived lavishly with their households on sites that had sometimes been occupied for several centuries. Their great hall (*skáli*), often built on a small hill, had access to the sea where possible. Archaeologists have uncovered such halls throughout Scandinavia: many are around forty metres long, as at Tissø in Sjælland (Denmark), but the one at Borg, in the Lofoten archipelago (Norway), is twice that size. Grand banquets were held there, as well as religious ceremonies.

The most influential *bændr*—local chieftains wealthy enough to maintain a retinue of warriors—formed the Scandinavian elite who established and controlled trading posts. Yet the merchants who came to Scandinavia were undoubtedly not stingy with information about the riches of the West and the weaknesses of its political situation, about the sea routes they followed and the sites that dotted them—abbeys, ports, towns, fortresses. To the east, there were few obstacles to penetrating the interior of the

continent. When the Scandinavian chieftains realised this, many of them, unable to resist the lure of profit, sought to seize the riches at source and by force – launching expeditions which they often led themselves.

The political context also played a role in Viking expansion, though not in a uniform manner. Above the local elite, petty kings controlled regions of varying sizes: they were elected, but from within noble lineages. Soon, several dynasties rose to power in Scandinavia and would gradually attempt to impose their authority on local chiefdoms and other small kingdoms.

Among the Danes, whose territories also extended to the provinces of Scania and Halland – now part of Sweden – and who also exercised authority over the region of Vestfold in modern-day Norway, an early dynasty emerged in the 8th century and established itself in southern Jutland. It was not until the 10th century that another dynasty, that of Jelling (in central Jutland), represented by Gorm *the Old* and then Harald *Fairhair*, completed the unification of the country. Nevertheless, in the 8th century, the Danish kings regarded Frankish expansionism as a real threat: indeed, as early as 737, they began construction of *the Danevirke* – an earthwork rampart reinforced with wooden beams and intended to block the southern part of the peninsula to ward off a possible invasion – whilst Charles Martel had launched several campaigns against the Saxons and had just subdued the Frisians. However, from 772 onwards, Charlemagne set about conquering Saxony and forced the Saxons to convert: despite the resistance of their leader, Widukind (who found refuge for a time with the Danish king, Sigfriðr), the Franks waged a merciless war that lasted until 804.

Four years later, Guðfriðr, now king, remained on the defensive and began the restoration and extension of *the Danevirke*. But he also went on the offensive: he attacked the Abodrites, his Wendish (Slavic) neighbours and allies of the Franks, then sent a fleet to ravage Frisia in 810. He was killed that year and his successors fought bitterly for power. But this expedition against Frisia, whilst primarily a show of force by the Danes, was also symptomatic of a new bellicose attitude in response to pressure from the Carolingians on their border.

It may not have been a Viking expedition in the strict sense, but it set the tone for what was to follow, when, after Charlemagne's death, his empire began to crumble. In 834, the trading post at Dorestad came under a severe attack, described in the *Annals of Saint Bertin*:

> 'A fleet of Danes arrived in Frisia and ravaged part of the country […] as far as the trading town of Dorestad, plundering and killing some of the inhabitants; they took others prisoner and burned part of the town.'

From then on, further raids followed, marking the beginning of Viking activity along the coasts of Frisia and Flanders, against which Louis the Pious attempted to organise a defence.

Norway was divided into a dozen small kingdoms (and principalities), each with distinct regional characteristics. There were as many petty kings (or princes known as *jarlar*; singular: *jarl*), as well as numerous local chieftains who vied with one another. According to Norse tradition, several dynasties exercised authority, notably that of *the jarlar* of the *Hlaðir* (Lade) in Trøndelag to the north, the *jarlar* of *Mærr* (Møre) to the west, and above all that of the kings of Vestfold to the south. It is from this dynasty, linked to the semi-legendary Swedish *Yngling* dynasty—said to have divine origins (descended from the god Freyr) and described by the skald Þjóðólfr of *Hvínir* in *the Ynglingatal*—that the Norwegian king Hálfdan *svarti* ('the Black') is said to have descended. His son, Haraldr *hárfagri*, subjugated the whole of south-western Norway and, according to the saga dedicated to him, his 'tyranny' forced into exile the many chieftains who rebelled against his authority, after defeating them in the famous naval battle of *Hafrsfjǫrðr* (Hafrsfjord, near Stavanger) in 872 – in reality between 880 and 890. This incomplete 'unification of Norway' – since the north remained resistant and the south-east was under Danish rule – was undoubtedly the source of the elite contribution to the colonisation of Iceland.

Sweden, for its part, was essentially divided between two peoples: the *Gautar*, settled in Götaland (*Gautland*) around Lakes Vätter and Väner, and the *Svíar*, settled in Svealand, around Lake Mälar (in the present-day provinces of Uppland, Södermanland and Västmanland). It was in the kingdom of

Svíar (*Svíaríki*) that the *Ynglingar* dynasty had its seat at *Uppsalir* (now Gamla Uppsala, not far from the modern city of Uppsala) and that the trading post of Birka was situated on an island in Lake Mälar. Several kings are attested there in the 9th century, notably Bjǫrn and Óláfr mentioned in the *Life of Saint Anschaire*, but it is above all the archaeological evidence that is most valuable because, prior to the accession of the first king of *the Svíar* to rule both peoples, Óláfr *sænski* ('the Swede'), who succeeded his father Eiríkr *sigrsæli* ('the Victorious') around 995, written records are scarce.

Broadly speaking, the Baltic Sea naturally drew the Swedes eastwards, whilst the Norwegians, facing the North Atlantic, set sail westwards towards the Scottish archipelagos and the Irish Sea, from where they then spread out. The Danes, for their part, travelled from Schleswig to the coasts of the North Sea and the English Channel.

However, Viking raiding parties were not all homogeneous. And Swedes might also venture westwards, just as Norwegians and Danes might head eastwards. According to the *Book of the Settlement of Iceland* (*Landnámabók*) – originally written in the early 12th century, of which there are two main versions: that of Sturla Þórðarson (*Sturlubók*) from around 1275, and that of Haukr Erlendsson (*Hauksbók*) from around 1300 – one of the first Scandinavians to set foot on Icelandic soil around 860 was a Swede, Garðarr Svávarsson, who, whilst sailing towards the Hebrides, was caught in a storm and drifted as far as Iceland, which he named *Garðarshólmr* ('Garðarr's Island'), discovering that it was an island. Conversely, one of the last great expeditions to the East, around 1040, in which Ingvarr *viðfǫrli* is the tragic hero, involved Icelanders, two of whom, having survived, were the inspiration for the saga dedicated to the Uppland chieftain.

the Viking expansion are manifold, linked to social, economic and political transformations. Furthermore, the Scandinavians were excellent sailors and possessed fast, manoeuvrable and sturdy ships that enabled them to navigate both the open sea and rivers – and without which there would be no Vikings. Their initial successes in the late 8th and early 9th centuries can be explained by the element of surprise, and their continued success was due to their ability to exploit their opponents' weaknesses, disorganisation or rivalries.

6
Did the Vikings sail in longships?

> 'The drakkar was a dragon just as the *pristis* of the ancients was a whale; that is to say, at the top of its prow was a dragon figure, and something in its elongated shape lent itself to the comparison that a poetic people might make between this warship and a great serpent.'
>
> Augustin JAL, *Naval Archaeology*, 1840

Despite its Scandinavian-sounding name, the word 'drakkar' is a French invention. "The *sagas* mention several types of ships," wrote the historian Georges-Bernard Depping in 1826, explaining that for some, "the figure of a dragon or some other fantastical creature, depicted on the prow, had led them to be called *drakar*, dragons". The term reappears in 1840 in the writings of Augustin Jal, who had read (and quoted) Depping's work. As the Navy's official historiographer, he published, in the first of the two volumes of his **Archéologie navale**, a treatise entitled *Sur les navires des Normands* (*On the Ships of the Normans*), which he had previously presented in 1836 to the Royal Institute of France. It is indeed in the form 'drakar', with a single k, that he

used the word, before writing it with two k's, 'drakkar', in a footnote in the second volume.

Augustin Jal consulted works written in Latin by Scandinavian scholars: he refers, among others, to 'Torféus', the Icelander Þormóður Torfason, to whom we owe a history of Norway (*Historia Rerum Norvegicarum*) published in 1711, and to 'Ihre', the Swedish philologist and author of a voluminous glossary of the Swedish language (*Glossarium suiogothicum*) published in 1769. Johan Ihre gives two definitions for the word '*drake*': that of 'dragon', but also that of 'a ship shaped like a dragon, of very long structure, and adorned with all manner of dragon-related ornaments ' – citing in support an Old Icelandic excerpt from the saga dedicated to the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason, whose warship, *Ormrinn langi* (the 'Long Serpent'), is described therein as *a dreki*: this word (whose plural is *drekar*) denotes a fabulous, monstrous serpent, in other words a dragon.

Augustin Jal concludes from this:

> 'That the vessel was very long; that its exterior, probably covered in painted scales, bore wings drawn on its sides; on its bow, and at the water's edge, clawed legs; at the tip of its prow, a fearsome dragon's head; and, at its raised stern, a sort of tail, either twisted or straight.'

He illustrates his point with a striking sketch captioned 'Hypothetical reconstruction *of a* drakar' and devises a curious etymology based on Danish: *'Drakar* (in modern Danish: *drage*, dragon; *kar*, vessel)' – *kar* does indeed mean 'vessel', but in the sense of 'container'! Yet the form *drakar* can be nothing other than, in the Scandinavian languages, the plural of the Swedish noun *drake*.

The fame of this eminent maritime specialist may well be behind the success of this term in French. As early as 1848, we find the following in Joseph de Bonnefoux and Edmond Pâris's *Dictionnaire de marine à voile et à vapeur*:

> "DRAKKAR, n. A type of large vessel in which Norman pirates and buccaneers sailed up the Seine in the 9th century to carry out their depredations."

And the word made its debut in 1905 in the first edition of the *Petit Larousse illustré*:

> "DRAKKAR, n. m. A boat used by Norman pirates: drakkars bore a dragon on their prow."

Not only is this word a barbarism, but its undeserved popularity has made it the term the French commonly and incorrectly use to refer to any type of Viking ship. Yet when one reads the skaldic poems and Icelandic sagas, one realises that more than one word is needed to describe the ships of the ancient Scandinavians.

The Orkneyinga saga (*Saga of the Orkneyingers*), for example, when *Jarl* Rǫgnvaldr in Norway is preparing to launch an expedition to retake the Orkneys, gives a detailed account of his ships: 'Six *stórskip*, five *skútur* and three *byrðingar*.'

And Egill Skallagrímsson, in the saga dedicated to him, to escape the pursuit of the Norwegian king Eiríkr *blóðøx*, moves from one vessel to another. He jumps from *the kaupskip* (where he is) onto a *skúta* with some of his men, and they row towards a channel between two islands as the king's *langskip* catches up with them:

> "The tide was ebbing; Egill and his men pushed the *skúta* into the fordable channel, but a *snekkja* could not pass through it, and they parted ways there; the king turned back towards the south."

These two examples clearly show that not all boats are identical – a fact confirmed by archaeological finds – and that the terminology is appropriate. They are distinguished by size: a ship is *a skip*, as opposed to *a bátr*, a simple boat or canoe (*eptirbátr*); or by the number of their rowing benches: a *tvítugsessa* (a 'twenty-bench' vessel), a *tritugsessa* (a 'thirty-bench' vessel). But also by their intended use: the *herskip* is the 'warship', also known, due to its slender silhouette, as *langskip* ('longship'), whilst the *kaupskip* is the 'merchant ship', also called *byrðingr* ('cargo ship').

In addition to the generic terms for these two groups, there are names for specific types of ships. The *skeið* (pl. *skeiðr* or *skeiðar*) is the longship (*langskip*) with more than 25 rowing benches, characteristic of the early days of

the Viking Age, as evoked by some fifty skaldic stanzas describing battle scenes; to take an example from archaeology, among the Skuldelev shipwrecks discovered in 1962 in Roskilde Fjord, Denmark, it is wreck no.2 that corresponds to it: 30 m long and 3.80 m wide, with a draught of 1 m, a sail area of 112 m²and 30 rowing benches, for a crew of 65 to 70 men.

The *snekkja* (pl. *snekkjur*) is also a *longship*, frequently mentioned in the sagas, but typically from the late Viking Age; it was shorter (often 20 benches) and even more efficient: wreck no.º 5 from Skuldelev is a small *snekkja* (with 13 benches), 17 m long and 2.5 m wide, with a draught of 0.6 m and a sail area of 46 m² , for a crew of around thirty men.

As for the *knǫrr* (pl. *knerrir*), it is distinguished by its wider, bulbous hull: this is the sturdy cargo ship capable of facing the open sea, attested in all Scandinavian sources: it corresponds to the Skuldelev Shipwreck No. 1, 16 m long and 4.80 m wide, with a draught of 1 m and a sail area of 90 m² , but only 2 or 4 oars for a crew of 6 or 8 men.

The *skúta* is a small, light and fast boat, intended primarily for coastal trade; Skuldelev Wreck No. 3 can be considered one such vessel: 14 m long and 3.3 m wide, with a draught of 0.9 m, a sail area of 45 m²and five oarlocks for a crew of 5 to 8 men. And the *karfi* is slightly smaller: perhaps corresponding to Skuldelev wreck no. 6, 11 m long and 2.5 m wide, with a draught of 0.5 m and a sail area of 26 m².

Nevertheless, the word *dreki* used to describe a ship is first attested in the 11th century in a few skaldic poems, such as Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Knútsdrápa* and Arnórr Þórðarson's *Hrynhenda*. Later, several sagas also mention *drekar*, which, with rare exceptions, were royal or princely warships of exceptional size. In *the Óláfs saga helga* (*Saga of Saint Óláfr*), for example, the King of Denmark, Knútr *ríki*, learns that Óláfr is preparing to invade Jutland. He then gathers his fleet and that of his current ally, the Norwegian *jarl* Hákon:

> 'He himself owned a *dreki* so large that it had sixty rowing benches. The figureheads were gilded. *Jarl* Hákon also had

> also a *dreki*: this one had forty oar-benches. Here too there were gilded figures, and the sails of both ships were striped with blue, red and green bands."

The *dreki* is therefore not strictly speaking a type of ship: the word anthropomorphises the *langskip*, either metaphorically in terms of its general appearance, or by metonymy, given that it actually features a figurehead (*hǫfuð*) modelled on this mythical creature. Such a vessel is easily spotted within a fleet. In the *Færeyinga saga*, Sigmundr, returning from an expedition in the Baltic Sea, drops anchor off *Elfarsker* and surveys the surroundings:

> 'He spotted five ships that had dropped anchor on the other side of the islet, and the fifth was a *dreki*.'

Among the various iconographic accounts, a sketch of a fleet of some forty ships, engraved on a small runic stick (dating from the 13th century) discovered in Bergen, in which the prows of two of them are surmounted by a dragon's head, is a fine illustration.

Ships fitted with figureheads (at the bow or stern) are sometimes referred to as *hǫfðaskip* or *hǫfuðskip*, and these heads are not exclusively those of dragons. Describing King Knútr's fleet in Latin around 1040, the author of *the Encomium Emmae reginae* mentions on the sterns of the ships 'metal figures adorned with gold and silver', notably 'a golden lion, a polished bronze dragon and a furious bull with golden horns'. According to the *Landnámabók*, the Norwegian Þórarinn Þorkelsson, who sailed to Iceland to settle there, also had 'a bull's head on the prow [*þjórshǫfuð á stafni*]' of his ship.

These figureheads are removable, as confirmed by the pagan laws of Iceland, which state, in the *Landnámabók*, that one must 'remove the figurehead before coming within sight of a country and not sail towards the coast with gaping mouths or grimacing snouts, lest one frighten the guardian spirits [*landvættir*]'.

Augustin Jal, in addition to 'drakkar', also uses a second barbarism: 'snekkar'. Depping already cites this word in this form; it is

true, but as a plural: "The *snekkar* or serpens, equipped with twenty rows of oarsmen."

Having discovered in Johan Ihre's Swedish glossary the word 'snæcka' (now spelled *snäcka*) and its dual definition: on the one hand 'shellfish, shell', and on the other 'a type of ship frequently mentioned in medieval writings', Jal suggests a no less fanciful etymology: *"snekkar* (snake-ship, *Kar-snog* in modern Danish)" and gives this description:

> "The *snekkar*, a rowing vessel, was probably a variant of the dragon-class ship. […] As for its shape, it must have differed little from that of the dragon; it was shorter, narrower and lower; it was decorated in much the same way as its superior in strength and size."

This is, of course, the *snekkja* (the Old Norse word is derived from *snákr*, 'serpent' in poetic language), but the choice of 'snekkar' is as clumsy as that of 'drakkar' for the same reasons, with the added complication of grammatical gender. Fortunately, this term did not enjoy the same success.

Augustin Jal is nevertheless aware that 'not all drakkar were of the same size, just as not all ships were drakkar'.

In this regard, it is interesting to note that three specific names for Viking ships were used in the vernacular in Normandy during the ducal period: *snekkja* became 'esnèque' in Old Norman, *skeið* became 'eschei' and *knǫrr* became 'kenar'.

The word 'esnèque' appears for the first time in the *Miracles of Saint Vulfran* (*Miracula sancti Vulfrani*), written in Latin in the mid-11th century: the crew of a ship that had capsized in the Seine estuary were saved, after praying to Saint Vulfran, by 'an immense vessel which, in a barbarian tongue, is called *isnechia*'. It was undoubtedly William the Conqueror who established the regular crossing of the English Channel on an esnèque between Barfleur and Portsmouth – a service maintained by the Anglo-Norman rulers until the end of the 12th century, the *ministerium de esnecca regis*.

The word is then commonly used in 12th-century texts, with a few variations. Robert Wace of Jersey, in the epic poem he

entitled *Le *Roman de Rou**, spells it ‘enege’ or ‘enesche’. In his ***Chronicle of the Dukes of Normandy***, Benoît de Sainte-Maure refers to the Anglo-Saxon “esneques” of the expedition to the Cotentin around the year 1000, repelled by the Normans. Around 1196, Ambroise, the author of *L’Estoire de la guerre sainte*, describes on several occasions the ‘enekes’ of Richard the Lionheart’s fleet that set out on the crusade to Jerusalem in 1189, and notes that horses were also loaded onto them.

The word ‘eschei’ is attested in the 12th century, but it was probably borrowed at an earlier date, when Viking raids were at their height. Geffrei Gaimar recounts (c. 1136) in his *Estoire des Engleis* that it was aboard their ‘escheiz’ that the Danes landed on the Isle of Sheppey in 854 to spend the winter there. And Robert Wace mentions the ‘esqueis’ of the Viking chieftain ‘Herout ’ (Haraldr), who settled in the Bayeux region around 945, and those of Duke William as he prepared to conquer England in 1066. This is consistent with the reference in the Bayeux Tapestry to the Duke’s own ship, described as a ‘great vessel’.

Finally, the word ‘kenar’ is borrowed from the Old Danish form *knar* (before the metathesis of *a* to *ǫ*) and is also found in the 12th century. Orderic Vital uses it in the Latinised form *canardus* in his *Historia ecclesiastica*: ‘Four large ships called canardes’, he writes. And Geffrei Gaimar mentions not only the Vikings’ “escheiz” in 854, but also their “kenarz”.

It would be wise to refrain from using the barbarism ‘drakkar’ and perhaps – why not? – to revive ‘esnèque’, ‘eschei’ and ‘kenar’, words from the langue d’oïl… which we lack today.

7
Did the Vikings use navigational instruments?

> ‘Flóki consecrated three ravens to show him the way, for in those days, long-distance sailors had no *leiðarsteinn* in the northern lands.’
>
> *Landnámabók* (*Hauksbók*, c. 1300)

In his version of the *Landnámabók*, Haukr Erlendsson, writing in Iceland in the early 14th century, uses the word *leiðarsteinn* (literally: ‘guiding stone’) to refer, most likely, to the compass. This word appears only once more in Norse texts: in a legendary saga, *Konráðs saga keisararsonar* (*The Saga of Konráðr, Son of the Emperor*). Yet we know that the first compasses did not appear in Europe until two hundred years after the settlement of Iceland and that they only became common in the 13th century. Did the Vikings therefore have no navigational instruments?

They were masters of the art of coastal navigation. For this type of navigation by sight, observing the coastline and knowledge of the routes—gained through personal experience or passed down from generation to generation—combined with a strict count of the days (*dægr*, 24 hours)

at sea to travel from one point to another, was sufficient for them to find their way. Thanks to the multitude of evocative names they gave to coastal landscapes and their distinctive features, they memorised them all the better and formed a sort of collective mental image.

However, to avoid the reefs and shoals near the coast, it is essential to sound the waters. In the *Konungs skuggsjá* (*Royal Mirror*), a text written in Norway around 1250, this is the advice a father gives to his son
"Whenever you approach a treacherous harbour, you risk encountering reefs." Although the sagas never mention it, it is likely that the Vikings had some form of sounding device: whether it was a rope weighted with a lead weight – as archaeology has revealed, notably a pear-shaped lead weight with a handle, found at Dorestad – or simply a long pole, useful in shallow water. This, at any rate, is what a scene from the Bayeux Tapestry from the 11th century seems to depict: the arrival of Harold Godwinson on the coast of Ponthieu. At the bow of one of his ships, a man is sounding the depth with a pole; and on board another, a man appears to be holding a sounding line whilst at the bow another man is preparing to drop anchor.

But the further the Vikings moved from the coast, the more they were forced to navigate by dead reckoning, and when they crossed the Atlantic (often at a constant latitude, but not always) they had to set a course and strive to hold it for the journey of some 4,000 kilometres. The position of the stars must necessarily have helped them in this.

Although the North Star is known in Old Norse as *'leiðarstjarna'*, meaning 'the guiding star', it is essentially only in spring and autumn that it can be used to indicate north, for in summer the northern nights are very bright and it is more difficult to see. The sun, on the other hand, allows the experienced navigator to orient themselves reasonably well: not only when it is at its highest point, due south (*í fullu suðri*), but throughout its apparent path across the sky, always from east to west, even though this changes with the seasons and depending on the latitude – generally between 62° and 64° north for the Vikings' transatlantic voyages.

But not only does knowing the sun's position not in itself reveal the boat's actual position, the sun must also be shining! During a crossing in overcast weather, it is advisable to check the course and make any necessary corrections as soon as

the sun breaks through; when clouds obscure it, one must endeavour to hold one's course by relying on two other references: the angle of the waves relative to the boat's axis and the direction of the wind. The sagas mention the weather vane (*veðrviti*) fixed to the bow or the top of the mast, of which several metal examples have been preserved.

The Vikings may have been aware of the sun's declination. In any case, in the early 12th century, the Icelander Oddi Helgason, nicknamed Stjǫrnu-Oddi (Oddi 'of the Star'), even drew up tables for it between the summer solstice and the winter solstice, recording the position of the sun at sunrise, noon and sunset every three days on the small island of Flatey where he lived, at 66° north.

It is also thanks to the sun that many navigational instruments function. But whilst it is established that the Vikings did not have maps, there is no evidence that they used such instruments, contrary to what two hypotheses tend to suggest.

The first is based on a short tale, **Rauðúlfs þáttr ok sona hans** (*The Tale of Rauðúlfr and His Sons*), which appears in the **Flateyjarbók**, an Icelandic manuscript from the late 14th century, and features King Óláfr Haraldsson and Sigurðr, one of Rauðúlfr's sons, the farmer (*bóndi*) whom the king is visiting: the setting is Norway in the early 11th century. Whilst the weather is overcast and snowing, the king asks Sigurðr to tell him how high the sun is in the sky, and Sigurðr answers without hesitation.

> 'Then the king had a sunstone [*sólarsteinn*] brought to him, held it above his head and saw that the light streaming from it indicated exactly the spot named by Sigurðr.'

Sunstones appear in a few Icelandic monastic and ecclesiastical inventories from the 14th and 15th centuries, and they are also mentioned in two sagas: that of the Icelandic bishop Guðmundr (*Guðmundar saga biskups*) and that of Hrafn Sveinbjarnarson (*Hrafns saga Sveinbjarnarsonar*). We read there, amongst other things, that 'the bishop gave Hrafn fine stallions, a sunstone and brown cloth for a cloak'. But these precious stones are not described, and there is no mention of their use for navigation.

Nevertheless, a Danish archaeologist has sought to demonstrate that the Vikings were aware of the optical properties of certain crystals, such as cordierite, which is found in Norway, or transparent calcite, known as Iceland spar. When correctly aligned with the sun's rays, these crystals polarise the sky and make it possible to determine the direction of the sun, even if it is obscured by clouds. Studies have shown that calcite is generally the more accurate of these two crystals, the reliability of which also depends on cloud cover and the sun's height above the horizon – twilight being the most favourable.

An Iceland spar was found in the wreck of an English ship that has lain on the seabed since the late 16th century off the coast of Alderney, one of the Channel Islands. Some scientists have pointed out that, as the metal mass of the cannons being transported was likely to disrupt the magnetic compass's orientation, the use of this crystal would support its use for navigation. However, no other such cases are known, and above all, it is impossible to confirm that this crystal was on board for that purpose.

In archaeological excavations of Viking ships (wrecks or burial sites), no sunstones have been found: there is no evidence linking them to Viking navigation, and this theory remains controversial.

It is equally impossible to prove the second hypothesis, according to which the Vikings possessed a solar compass.

During excavations on the shores of a fjord in southern Greenland, the Uunartoq (known as *Siglufjǫrðr* by Scandinavian settlers), half of a wooden disc, seven centimetres in diameter, was discovered near the site of an ancient 11th-century monastery, with a hole barely two centimetres wide in its centre. This remaining half is marked with sixteen fairly regular notches around its circumference and engraved with two geometric curves as well as a small scale of sixteen horizontal lines.

Some have been quick to see a link between this small object and navigation: it is thought to be a fragment of a rudimentary bearing dial (or a rough draft of a dial), whose triangular notches would correspond to the thirty-two wind directions and whose curves could be those of a sundial, in other words gnomonic curves. Experiments using (enlarged) replicas of this

object, reconstructed in its entirety as we imagine it today, have been carried out on several occasions by experienced sailors: they have demonstrated that the shadow of the gnomon – the small point protruding from the centre of the disc – cast by the sun allows the navigator to find north and orient themselves.

In the Icelandic sagas and other medieval Scandinavian texts, there is no mention whatsoever of any sundials that the Vikings might have used. However, in 1555, the Swede Olaus Magnus (Olof Månsson), in his famous *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (*History of the Northern Peoples*), refers to a *'nauticum* gnomonem', which may well refer to a sundial. And archaeology has unearthed several objects: a small wooden disc with a hole in the centre, discovered at Wolin, engraved with lines that could be those of a compass, but which may just as well be mere decoration; the even less plausible remains of another at Stóra Borg, in southern Iceland, probably from the 13th century; and on the island of Lolland, in Denmark, a triangular stone with a hole in it and engraved with lines and curves reminiscent of the sun's path, but likely just a decorated stone.

Only new, conclusive discoveries could validate the theory, which is based on a unique artefact dating from the late Viking Age.

It is also worth noting that, in the early 19th century, fishermen in the Faroe Islands used an instrument that may well be of ancient origin: the *sólskuggjafjøl* (literally: 'sun-shadow board'). It consists of a circular wooden dial, floating in a container filled with water, engraved with two concentric circles and pierced in its centre by a needle (*styllur*) that can be adjusted in height to correspond to the solstices and the equinox. By measuring, using the circles, the lengthening of the shadow cast by the sun at its zenith, it is possible to determine the latitude. This type of dial may predate the compass, but it is not known how long it has existed.

Navigating by dead reckoning across the Atlantic does not preclude either a tally of days at sea or a precise description. The *Landnámabók,* for example, puts it in these terms:

> 'From *Staðr* [= the Stad Peninsula] in Norway, it takes seven days' sailing [*sjau dægra sigling*] to Horn, east of Iceland, and

> from Snæfellsnes, the shortest crossing to Greenland is four days at sea [*fjǫgra dægra haf*]."

Or again:

> "From *Hernar* [= Hennøya, an island north of Bergen] in Norway, one must sail due west to *Hvarf* [= Cape Farvel] in Greenland. We then sail north of the Shetland Islands, which can only be seen in clear weather, but south of the Faroe Islands so that half the mountains rise above the horizon, then south of Iceland where we spot birds and whales."

But conditions are far from always favourable and, in bad weather, the ship's crew are quickly soaked and must bail out water ceaselessly. The sagas speak of treacherous mists in which sailors lose their way, and terrible storms that cause numerous shipwrecks. Many ships never reach their destination.

8
Did the Vikings threaten Paris on several occasions?

> "I do not think that, even a few years ago, any king on earth would have imagined, nor any inhabitant of our globe would have consented to learn, that a foreigner would enter our Paris."
>
> Radbert of Corbie,
> *Expositio in lamentationes Hieremiae*, between 845 and 857

At the beginning of the 9th century, Paris was not a capital and played no political role: only a count resided in the Palace of the Cité. However, the city was very well situated, and commercial and craft activity was concentrated on the Île de la Cité (protected by its Gallo-Roman walls) as well as on both banks of the Seine (linked by a wooden bridge). Added to this was the intellectual and spiritual influence of the great neighbouring abbeys, such as Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

After a four-year lull, in early March 845, a Viking fleet (numbering 120 ships according to the annals) sailed up the Seine for the second time. The Vikings captured Rouen, which had already been ravaged in 841, then sailed up the river towards Paris without encountering any resistance,

engaging in pillaging with impunity, particularly in the vicinity of the former Charlevanne. At their head was a chieftain named Ragnarr: his name, mentioned among others in the *Annals of Xanten* (*Annales Xantenses*), the *Translation* and the *Miracles of Saint Germain*, is Latinised as *Reginherus* and *Ragenarius* respectively.

The young king, Charles the Bald – who had just been granted the western part of the Empire at the Division of Verdun in 843 and was residing at the Palace of Verberie, near Compiègne – struggled to organise a defence. The Vikings reached Paris on 28 March and stormed the city the following day, Easter Sunday. The *Annals of Saint-Bertin*, penned by Prudence (Bishop of Troyes), explain that Charles the Bald, unable to confront them, negotiated with them from the Abbey of Saint-Denis and bought their departure for 7,000 pounds of silver. And Prudence adds that after returning to the sea, they laid waste to all the coastal regions. The *Annals of Fulda* specify that after receiving a considerable sum – indeed, no Viking chieftain had ever obtained so much before! – they withdrew peacefully, but that they subsequently fought three successive battles in Frisia before razing the fortified city of Hamburg in Saxony – a sacking described in detail in the *Vita Anskarii*.

Unlike the annals, which make no mention of the sacking of Paris, two hagiographical texts – the **Translatio sancti Germani**, written shortly after the events by an anonymous author, and the *Miracula sancti Germani*, a rewriting of the former forty years later by Aimoin, a monk of Saint-Germain-des-Prés – recount that the Vikings invaded this abbey (from which the monks had fled, taking their relics with them) and began to ransack it, never imagining that the saint would defend his sanctuary. For, we are told, several miracles then took place.

Three Vikings, in the process of prying a beam from the church to use for their ship, fall to their deaths in front of the altar. Another, who is furiously hacking away at a marble column of the saint's tomb with his sword, finds his hand withering away. The church is suddenly filled with such a terrifying mist that the Vikings flee the monastery (leaving, however, enough wine in the cellars to ensure Masses can be held until the next harvest), and are then struck by a horrific epidemic of dysentery to which many succumb – but which spares their Christian prisoners. These calamities are said to have prompted Ragnarr to meet the king at Saint-Denis.

But the story does not end there. The *Annals of Saint-Bertin* indicate that, some time later, after their raids along the coast, they are
'blinded by darkness and struck with madness' upon their return to Denmark, to King Hárekr. And the *Annals of Xanten* state that Ragnarr, 'the leader of these scoundrels', fell victim to this himself, succumbing to God's justice – whilst Aimoin delights in describing his horrific death: he loses all his senses, then his body bursts open and all his entrails spill out.

The second attack on Paris took place in the depths of winter, for by now the Vikings no longer hesitated to set up camp on one or another island in the Seine "to spend the winter in a place protected by the waters", as the *Chronicle of Fontenelle* explains. We know of at least two: *Fossa Givaldi*, an island opposite Jeufosse, upstream from Vernon and near the confluence of the Epte; and *Oscellus*, now known as Île Sainte-Catherine, between Oissel and Tourville-la-Rivière, which would later become *Torhulmus*, the Latinised form of the name apparently given to it by the Vikings, *Þórshólmr* ('Þórr's islet', perhaps indicating a place of worship).

It is the *Annals of Saint-Bertin* that state that 'on 28 December [856], Danish pirates raided the city of Paris and set it ablaze'. They set fire to most of the churches, with the exception of the cathedral, dedicated to Saint Stephen, and the abbeys of Saint-Germain-des-Prés and Saint-Denis, "which were spared from the fire in exchange for a large sum of money". The annals give the name of *Berno*, or Bjǫrn, to the leader of these Vikings, who were then settled on the Seine.

In early April 858, these same Vikings came to abduct, in the midst of the Easter celebrations, the abbots of Saint-Denis and Saint-Germain-des-Prés. The first, Louis, was Charlemagne's grandson on his mother's side and the king's archchancellor, and the second, his half-brother Gauzlin, would later become Bishop of Paris. They then demanded a huge ransom for their release, explain the *Annals of Saint-Bertin*, and for this, 'by order of King Charles, many of the treasures of God's churches were plundered throughout his kingdom'.

The Vikings continued their raids with renewed vigour, and in January 861 they attacked Paris for the third time. Again, according to the *Annals of Saint-Bertin*:

> "The Danes burned Paris and the church of Saint Vincent, the martyr, and Saint Germain, the confessor; they pursued and captured merchants who were fleeing upriver along the Seine."

Charles the Bald, who until then, apart from a few rare displays of force, had been content to yield to the Vikings' threats, negotiate with them, or even pay for their departure, endeavoured from the 860s onwards to pursue a defensive policy consisting of restoring the Gallo-Roman city walls and blocking the waterways. Thus, in 862, he began construction of a fortified bridge near Pîtres (Pont-de-l'Arche), at the confluence of the Seine, the Eure and the Andelle.

Work progressed slowly, and when, in 865, some fifty ships sailed up the Seine, the Vikings seized the still-unfinished bridge. The *Annals of Saint-Bertin*, now compiled by Hincmar, Archbishop of Reims, note that 'the Normans sent some two hundred of their men to Paris, who, finding no wine there—which was what they had come to seek—returned empty-handed to those who had sent them'.

But in October, the Vikings pressed on to Paris for the fourth time:

> "The Normans had entered the Abbey of Saint-Denis, where they remained for twenty days, carrying booty to their ships every day, and after much ravaging, they returned unhindered to their camp."

The following year, Charles the Bald finally secured the departure of the Vikings, who had sailed up the Seine as far as Melun, by paying them a further tribute of 4,000 pounds of silver in June.

Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the Pîtres Bridge was demonstrated in the years that followed, and the Seine valley enjoyed a relative lull. In Paris, Charles the Bald also had the Grand-Pont fortified, which linked the Île de Cité to the right bank (roughly where the Pont-au-Change stands today), and the Petit-Pont, which linked it to the left bank (at the same spot as the current Petit-Pont). On each bank, they were defended by a tower (or châtelet), with the one on the Grand-Pont being built of stone.

In July 885, the Vikings reappeared on the Seine, having come from the regions of the Somme and the Scheldt, and were halted by the fortified bridges. The defences at Pont-de-l'Arche did not hold out for long against their assault. 'In November, the Normans entered the Oise,' explain the *Annals of Saint-Vaast* (*Annales Vedastini*), 'they captured and destroyed Pontoise. " But when they arrived at the gates of Paris on 24 November, the free passage across the bridges that their leader, Sigfriðr (Latin: *Sigfridus*), possibly the Danish king, sought to negotiate in order to reach Burgundy, was refused by Bishop Gauzlin. Neither he nor the Count of Paris, Eudes, then aged twenty-five, were daunted by the size of the Viking fleet – assuming that the monk of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, Abbon, did not grossly overestimate it in the account he would write around 890 of these events, of which he himself was a witness: *Bella Parisiacae urbis* (*The Battles of the City of Paris*, a long epic poem in Latin, better known by the title *The Siege of Paris by the Normans*). He speaks of 'seven hundred large ships and a thousand smaller boats' and 'forty thousand men', to the extent that the fleet had to
"to cover the Seine for about ten kilometres downstream from Paris"!

The Vikings immediately attempted, on two occasions, to storm the tower of the Grand-Pont, but to no avail: they then decided to lay siege to the town. Abbon writes that they set up "not far from Saint-Germain-le-Rond [now Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois] a camp whose defences consisted of a mixture of stakes, piles of stones and earth", and that they erected
"a thousand tents which they covered with animal skins". The site of their entrenched camp probably corresponds today to the Cour Carrée of the Louvre: from there they had very easy access to the river, at the level of the present-day Pont des Arts.

The winter was harsh. Their new offensive against the Grand-Pont took place on 31 January 886 and lasted three days: despite the enormous battering rams used against the (unfinished) tower and the fire ships launched from the river, the Parisians held their ground. But on 6 February, a flood of the Seine swept away the central section of the Petit-Pont, isolating its wooden tower on the left bank and cutting it off from any reinforcements coming from the Cité. The Vikings rushed in and set it alight: Abbon lists the names of its last twelve valiant defenders. The Vikings then set up a second camp on the left bank, around the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, directly opposite the first – a way of tightening the blockade, as they also needed to obtain supplies from the region between the Seine and the Loire.

Responding to a call from Gauzlin, Count Henry of Babenberg brought provisions to the people of Paris but was unable to free them. The *Annals of Saint-Vaast* then report that Gauzlin sought to 'reach an agreement with *Sigfridus*, King of the Danes, so that the siege of the city might be lifted'. Abbon mentions the promise of a tribute of 60 pounds of silver and Eudes's involvement in the negotiations, as the bishop fell victim to an epidemic raging in the city and died on 16 April. Sigfriðr withdrew with his own troops, but many Vikings remained behind and continued the siege.

To secure the aid of Emperor Charles the Fat (who had just restored Charlemagne's empire for the final time), Eudes secretly left the city – which, in his absence, was managed by Gauzlin's nephew, the abbot Èbles, who himself had carried out several deadly sorties, as Abbon recounts not without humour: 'He pierced seven Danes at once with a single arrow and, joking [*ludens*], ordered the others to take them to the kitchen.' But Abbon also praises Count Eudes' bravery as he charged through the Viking ranks on his return.

During the summer, the emperor advanced slowly with his troops towards Paris. He sent Henri de Babenberg on a reconnaissance mission, but he was killed in an ambush on 28 August. The Vikings managed to break into the city and plunder several churches, but met with resistance from those under siege and withdrew for fear of being caught off guard by the Frankish army.

The army finally took up position on the heights of Montmartre in the second half of September, but the emperor did not dare to confront the Vikings (and Sigfriðr had returned): he chose to negotiate rather than fight. He allows the Vikings to plunder Burgundy during the winter and undertakes to pay them 700 pounds of silver the following spring as the price for the definitive lifting of the siege. The *Annals of Metz* (*Annales Mettenses*) condemn his conduct in these terms: 'He did nothing there that was worthy of imperial majesty. " The new Bishop of Paris, Anscheric, paid this tribute upon their return in May 887. Paris had resisted in vain. However, the heroic defence of the city under Eudes' command and Charles the Fat's inability to fulfil his responsibilities led the princes to depose the emperor and elect the Count of Paris and King of West Francia in February 888.

But the Vikings continued their raids and appeared once more before Paris in the autumn of 889: this time, Eudes drove them back by paying a ransom.

9
Was the first Duke of Normandy a Viking?

> "They had a son, Hrólfr, who conquered Normandy. He was so tall that no horse could carry him: that is why he was called Gǫngu-Hrólfr [= Hrólfr the Walker]. It is from him that the *jarlar* of Rouen [= the Dukes of Normandy] and the kings of England are descended."
>
> *Orkneyinga saga*, c. 1190–1230

It was in 820 that the Vikings first appeared in the Bay of Seine: thirteen ships, which the coastal guards managed to repel. But the raids on Neustria really began twenty years later and intensified from the 850s onwards. Bands of Norwegian Vikings landed on the Channel Islands (now the Channel Islands) and the northern Cotentin, whilst entire fleets, mainly Danish, kept sailing up the Seine and its tributaries: the Vikings plundered the country almost with impunity, despite the repeated efforts of Frankish kings such as Charles the Bald (840–877) and Eudes (888–898).

During the last decade of the 9th century, Vikings (mostly Danes by) began to settle in the territories neighbouring the

the mouth of the Seine, and soon a leader emerged: a certain Hrólfr – whose name is most often Latinised as *Rollo* and becomes Rollon (or sometimes Rou) in French – who likely went so far as to conclude a truce with the Archbishop of Rouen, who advocated for a degree of coexistence, and to pledge to spare the city. In fact, at that time, the city was home not only to a Frankish population, but also to religious authorities – the Bishop of Coutances found refuge there after 890, for example – and even administrative officials (attested in 905), and was attempting to rebuild itself (as confirmed by archaeology).

In his *History of the Normans*, Dudon of Saint-Quentin asserts that this truce was concluded near Jumièges as early as 876, the date on which, according to him, Rollo landed in Neustria and from which point he carried out all manner of exploits – whereas in the annals and other contemporary documents his name never appears amongst those of the Viking chieftains cited. There is no evidence to confirm this date, but this does not necessarily rule out his mere participation in the siege of Paris under the command of King Sigfriðr in 885 or his capture of Bayeux in 890. It was, moreover, on this latter occasion that, again according to Dudon, he captured Popa, the daughter of Count Béranger (who undoubtedly held a military command in Neustria), and married her. Or rather (according to Guillaume de Jumièges), that he first took her as a concubine, 'in the Danish manner' (*more danico*). She would later bear him a son, the future William Longsword.

But who was Rollo? There are two conflicting accounts of him.

The Norse tradition portrays him as a Norwegian bearing the nickname Gǫngu-Hrólfr: 'the walker', or perhaps 'the wanderer'. The *Orkney Saga*, the earliest version of which dates from around 1190, is the oldest of the Icelandic sagas to mention him: he is the son of *Jarl* Rǫgnvaldr of Møre, whose family took control of the Orkney Islands. Then the *Saga of Haraldr the Fair-Haired* states that he was banished by the King of Norway and that his mother tried in vain to secure his pardon, and his journey is briefly described: before settling in Neustria, he stayed in the Hebrides where, according to the *Landnámabók* (whose original text, now lost, may be partly attributable to Ari *fróði*), he had a daughter, Kaðlín, who would marry a Scottish king, Bjólan.

Yet his nickname has left no trace in Normandy, and the sagas, usually so lavish with detail when describing military exploits

of arms, reduce Hrólfr's exploits to this simple sentence: 'He conquered Normandy.'

Only one other Scandinavian source, *the Historia Norwegiae* (*History of* (*Norway*), written in Latin in the second half of the 12th century, provides a detailed account of Rollo's capture of Rouen – whose name, incidentally, appears in the Latin form *Rodulfus* in this text. After hiding fifteen ships in a bend of the river, the Vikings dug trenches which they concealed beneath branches and grass; and when, as night fell, the townspeople sought to drive them away, they fell into the pits and were massacred.

The Norman tradition is introduced by Dudon, who presents him as a native of Dacia, the son of a powerful chieftain (whose name he does not mention); upon the chieftain's death, Rollo and his brother, Gurim (Gormr?), must face the 'Dacian' king, who eventually seizes their domain through treachery. Gurim is killed in battle and Rollo is forced to flee: he first takes refuge on the island of 'Scanza ' (Scania [which is not an island]?) before setting off for England, where he associated with 'the very Christian King Alstemus' (perhaps the Danish chieftain Guðrum, who received Estanglia from King Alfred of Wessex in 879, following his forced baptism under the name Athelstan). Then, following a plundering expedition to Frisia, he reached the banks of the Seine.

Dudon actually makes *Daci* (the 'Dacians') synonymous with *Dani* (the 'Danes', or more generally the 'men of the North'). Given that it was Rollo's grandson, Duke Richard I, who commissioned him in 996 to write this *History of the Normans*, and then his successor Richard II who asked him to complete it, we may assume that both were aware of their ancestor's origins and that Dudon used the term appropriately. This, at any rate,
that the monk William of Jumièges understood it – who, around 1060, wrote his own *Gesta Normannorum ducum* (*Deeds of the Dukes of the Normans*) at the request of William the Conqueror: he takes up and continues Dudon's work, but he rephrases, summarises, removes many embellishments and clearly substitutes the words 'Dacians' and 'Dacia' with 'Danes' (*Dani*) and 'Denmark' (*'Dacia quæ est* Danamarcha'). The Norman tradition would subsequently prevail in the *Grandes Chroniques de France*.

In contrast, in 12th-century Denmark, the scholar Saxo Grammaticus ('the grammarian'), who was familiar with Dudon's work and quotes from it, makes no mention of Rollo in his **Gesta* Danorum* and does not attribute the colonisation of Normandy to

the Danes. It is only from the 13th century onwards that we find, in several chronicles, brief mention of Rollo's Danish origins, which appear to have been adopted from the Norman tradition.

The Scandinavian tradition has resolutely opted for his Norwegian origin (from the west coast), and this is entirely possible; the Norman tradition is nonetheless valid. Moreover, in the 9th century, the geopolitical context was such that Danish rule extended as far as the Oslo Fjord. Instead of being the Gǫngu-Hrólfr of the sagas, could Rollo be another Hrólfr, perhaps originally from Vestfold?

The fact remains that, at the start of the 10th century, whilst the Vikings of the Seine spared Rouen, they continued their raids elsewhere; however, their attack on Auxerre was repelled in 910, and their siege of Chartres in July 911 ended in further defeat at the hands of Richard the Just, Duke of Burgundy, and Robert, Marquis of Neustria. According to Dudon, it was following lengthy negotiations led by the Archbishop of Rouen that King Charles the Simple (who had come to power in 893), accompanied by the Marquis of Neustria and other nobles of the kingdom, met their leader, Rollo, surrounded by his comrades-in-arms.

We know with certainty neither the date nor the place of their meeting, nor even the exact terms of the agreement reached between them, but everything suggests that it was concluded in the autumn of 911 at Saint-Clair (*'ad sanctum* Clerum', as Dudon writes), on the banks of the Epte; and the reality of this agreement is confirmed by a deed signed by the king himself on 14 March 918, by which he donated to the Abbey of Saint-Germain-des-Prés the lands that had belonged to the former Abbey of La Croix-Saint-Leufroy (on the banks of the Eure),

"except for that part of the abbey which we have ceded to the Normans of the Seine, that is to say to Rollo and his companions [*Rolloni suisque comitibus*], for the protection of the kingdom [*pro tutela regni*]".

This royal charter, dating from around the same time as what is commonly known as the 'Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte', is also the first known document to mention the name of Rollo!

It sets out the two main clauses defined by Dudon: the "permanent [*in sempiternum*]" transfer of a territory "*in alodo and in* fundo", that is to say, in full ownership – in the charter, the verb *annuere* expresses this genuine donation – and the Viking leader's commitment to protect the kingdom by preventing further incursions by the

the Seine Valley, a commitment that does not make him a vassal, but rather a loyal subject of the king who must answer his call should the need arise. As for the extent of this territory, Flodoard writes in his *History of the Church of Reims* (*Historia Remensis ecclesiae*) that it comprises 'certain coastal regions and the city of Rouen'. Dudon, for his part, explains that the king grants Rollo the land 'from the Epte to the sea [*a flumine Eptae usque ad mare*]"—which likely corresponds to the dioceses of Rouen, Évreux and Lisieux—and that, furthermore, he grants him at his request "a land to plunder to provide for his livelihood", namely the "land of the Bretons [*terra Britannica*]": not the whole of Brittany, but the Cotentin and the Avranchin, previously ceded to the Bretons in 867.

Dudon also highlights another clause, common in treaties: the king promises to give one of his daughters, Gisèle, in marriage to Rollo after his conversion. In reality, she was still only a child in 911 and would die before reaching puberty.

On the other hand, the conversion of Rollo and his companions to Christianity is a key factor. Rollo was baptised at the beginning of 912 and given the name Robert, after his godfather, the Marquis of Neustria. Whilst this baptism enabled Rollo to win over the clergy and the local Christian population, for Charles the Simple it justified admitting the 'Prince of the Normans' into the ranks of the kingdom's nobility. However, a letter from the Archbishop of Reims (in reply to that of Rouen), which advocates a degree of leniency towards the new converts, clearly shows that baptism did not immediately transform them all into good Christians: it took some time for pagan beliefs and practices to disappear completely.

Rollon thus became 'Count of Rouen' (*comes Rothomagensis*). It was not until his great-grandson, Richard II, that the title of duke was first held. However, Dudon also, incorrectly, applies this title to his three predecessors, and the custom has taken hold of referring to them all as the 'first dukes' of Normandy.

Rollo made remarkable use of the some seventeen years he spent at the head of his county, maintaining relations that were at times friendly, at times conflictual, with the other holders of power among whom he had established himself, whilst displaying unwavering support for Charles the Simple. He did not seek to recreate a purely Nordic territory; on the contrary, he preserved the

Carolingian system in place, which also benefited the new Scandinavian elite he was establishing by distributing to his comrades-in-arms the lands left vacant by the departure of the monks and the great Frankish landowners.

A few traces of Norse influence remain in local customs Norman law, as recorded in writing in the 13th century, particularly in the maritime sphere with legislation on shipwrecks (the 'right of *wrecks'*, still in force today in the Channel Islands) and matters relating to the fishing industry; but also in one of Rollo's priorities, security and public order, with banishment accompanied by the confiscation of property, which punished all offences against the ruling authority. Its Scandinavian origin seems confirmed by the name it still bears in a cartulary dated around 1050, or in the *Roman de Rou*, circa 1170: ullac (from the Old Norse adjective *útlagr*, 'banished'). And certain rules concerning the inheritance of property or the practice of cohabitation recognised without ecclesiastical sanction, in the same way as legal marriage, are probably also of Nordic origin. But on the whole, the institutions and administrative districts remain almost unchanged.

Rollon also managed to expand his territory following a conflict with King Raoul, who succeeded Charles the Simple after the latter had been deposed and imprisoned. In 924, he secured the dioceses of Bayeux and Sées. He died of old age, probably around 932, having brought his son into power a few years earlier. And it was the latter, William Longsword, who in 933 obtained the dioceses of Coutances and Avranches: 'the land of the Bretons situated on the coast', in the words of Flodoard. But he would face the problem of the Northern Cotentin, where the Vikings who had settled there—many of them Norwegians—were keen to retain their independence and would rebel on several occasions against the authority of the Counts of Rouen. In any case, it is that the limits of this which will soon be called the 'Normandy', almost the same as today, thus correspond to those of the ecclesiastical province of Rouen, and that William deserves credit for consolidating the still fragile structure left by his father.

Rollo, the Viking chieftain who was forced to leave Scandinavia, succeeded in founding the future powerful Duchy of Normandy and laying the foundations for a genuine political and economic boom there, by choosing to integrate

as fully as possible into the Frankish world and imposing his choice on his comrades-in-arms. An exceptional achievement in the history of Viking expansion!

10
Did Brittany almost become a second Normandy?

> 'Count Robert laid siege for five months to the Normans who had occupied the Loire and, after receiving hostages from them, granted them Brittany, which they had ravaged along with the region of Nantes, and they began to profess the Christian faith.'
>
> Flodoard of Reims, *Annals*, 921

The Vikings began landing on the Breton coast as early as the beginning of the 9th century, but it was following the deadly sacking of Nantes on 24 June 843 that the Bretons became aware of the danger they posed. In 847 (according to the *Annals of Saint-Bertin*), Duke Nominoë suffered three successive defeats at the hands of the Vikings settled at the mouth of the Loire and eventually paid for their departure. His son, Érispoë, succeeded him in 851 and assumed the title of king.

New fleets sailed up the Loire as far as Orléans, pillaging Angers, Blois and Tours along the way, as well as neighbouring regions: among others, the fleets of *Godfridus* (i.e. Guðfriðr, possibly the son of the Danish king Haraldr *klak*) in 853, and *Sidricus* (Sigtryggr) in 854. The Vikings also attacked Vannes and captured its bishop and Count Pascweten, who were subsequently released in exchange for a ransom. In 857, Érispoë was assassinated and Brittany

lost a valuable leader, whilst the Scandinavian raids were reaching alarming proportions.

Salomon, his cousin, took power and negotiated with both the Franks and the Vikings led by the formidable *Hastingus* (Hásteinn), as in 869 on the banks of the Vilaine at Avessac. As a result, Brittany enjoyed a brief respite. But after Salomon's death—he was assassinated in 874—the Vikings naturally took advantage of fifteen years of conflict over his succession, first between the counts of Rennes and Vannes, Gurwant and Pascweten, and then between the former's son, Judicaël, and the latter's brother, Alain.

Viking fleets successively appeared or crossed paths along the coasts and on the course of the Loire, where Hásteinn in particular wreaked havoc until 882. Faced with the gravity of the situation, the two Breton counts eventually put their differences aside: they made 'preparations with combined forces', explains the *Chronicle* of Regino of Prüm. However, the campaign was conducted clumsily: Judicaël was killed and Alain alone secured a victory that may have earned him the nickname Alain the Great. With the title of king, he devoted himself to restoring order in Brittany, managed to curb Viking activity, and even undertook the reconstruction of churches. But his death in 907, with no designated successor, ushered in a period of unprecedented instability and political crisis. Not only did Gourmaëlon, the Count of Cornouaille, lack the authority to assert himself, but following the cession of the county of Rouen to Rollon (Hrólfr) in 911, many Vikings moved towards the Loire and made Brittany their new centre of activity.

Two Danish chieftains, whom the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* refers to as *Ohter* and *Hroald* (Óttarr and Hróaldr), were undoubtedly the ones who, in 913, plundered and burned the monastery of Landévennec before going on to ravage Wales the following year. Gourmaëlon died, leaving no legitimate ruler, and a veritable exodus of the religious elite ensued, which intensified during the early decades of the 10th century: the monasteries of Brittany were increasingly deserted.

In the spring of 919, a Viking fleet sailed towards Brittany and entered the Loire, commanded by a Norwegian chieftain whom Flodoard names *Ragenoldus* (that is to say, Rǫgnvaldr). The Vikings seized Nantes and controlled the Loire estuary. The scale of the invasion was exaggerated by the

chroniclers: ‘the Normans ravaged the whole of Little Britain, the Bretons being either killed or driven out’, as we read, for example, in a fragment of the annals from Redon Abbey. But whilst in reality Brittany was not completely depopulated, it is true that most of the Breton nobles fled, such as the Count of Poher, Mathuédoï, who took refuge in England with his son, Alain (later nicknamed Barbetorte), born of his marriage to a daughter of Alain the Great. Be that as it may, Rǫgnvaldr became the new strongman in a Brittany destined for political collapse.

In 921, a Frankish army led by Robert, the Marquis of Neustria, laid siege to Nantes. However, after five months, Robert lifted the siege without attempting to storm the city and, according to Flodoard’s *Annals*, he ceded to the Vikings ‘Brittany, which they had ravaged, along with the region of Nantes’ – just as Charles the Simple, ten years earlier, had ceded the county of Rouen to Rollo under the Treaty of Saint-Clair-sur-Epte. Deposed in 922, Charles the Simple invoked Rǫgnvaldr’s support on the same terms as Rollo’s, thereby implicitly recognising his settlement in Nantes.

Unfortunately, there are virtually no sources concerning Brittany from that time until the return of Alain Barbetorte in 936. However, a few external events do shed some light on its history. In 924, in particular, Rǫgnvaldr ravaged a large part of Burgundy, where he clashed with the local nobility; then, in early 925, he found himself surrounded by King Raoul, Hugh the Great and Herbert of Vermandois, who had joined forces, but he boldly broke through their lines and managed to return to Brittany.

Realising the urgency of a new campaign against the Vikings of the Loire, Hugh and Herbert attempted a fresh siege of Nantes in 927, but with no greater success. After five weeks, they made peace with the besieged and ceded the Nantes region to them in full ownership. Flodoard’s *Annals* no longer mention Brittany as they had previously done in 921.

Rǫgnvaldr is not mentioned again after 925, and all the evidence suggests that he died that year or, at the latest, in 930. In the *Miracles of Saint Benedict* (*Miracula sancti Benedicti*), written in the early 11th century, Aimoin gives a gripping account of his death, a sign that the popular consciousness had been struck by the terror he inspired. Furthermore, some Vikings settled on the Guérande peninsula, in the Gulf of Morbihan and in Cornouaille, whilst others settled in Léon, Trégor and the Dol region. However, the nature of any relations

between these different communities—some rural, others military in nature—and the influence of Nantes on this whole are unknown to us.

The Vikings of the Loire ravaged the Limousin in 930, but King Raoul retaliated without delay. Then, on 29 September 931, a Breton uprising took place in Cornouaille. Flodoard describes the events in these terms:

> 'The Bretons who remained subject to the Normans in *Cornu Galliae*, rebelling against those who had subjugated them, are said to have massacred, on the feast of Saint Michael, the Normans living among them, beginning with their leader, *Felecanus*.'

This name may be the Latinised form of Feochán or Finnacán, the name of an Iro-Norwegian. The monk Hugh of Fleury, in his 12th-century **Histoire moderne**, appears to broaden the context of this event by placing Count Juhel Bérenger – who remained in Rennes – and Alain Barbetorte at the head of the Breton rebels; for Barbetorte, this would have been his first attempt to regain control of Brittany.

Once the element of surprise had worn off, the Vikings of the Loire – who, according to Flodoard, were led by *Inconus* (perhaps Hákon?) – launched a major punitive expedition against Brittany. According to Hugh of Fleury, William Longsword took part in this crackdown – an intervention that forced Alain to go into exile once more – before reconciling with Count Bérenger. When King Raoul ceded Avranches and the Cotentin to William in 933, he satisfied his territorial ambitions but effectively prevented him from coming to the aid of the Vikings of the Loire as he had done in 931. The last major expedition they undertook, according to reliable sources, in Berry in 935, ended in failure, further undermining their military power.

The year 936 promised to be decisive. The abbot of Landévennec, who had remained in contact with the Breton exiles, summoned Alain Barbetorte, whom the Bretons regarded as the rightful heir to Alain the Great. The *Chronicle of Nantes* (*Chronicon Namnetense*), dating from the mid-11th century, is the only text that traces the itinerary – which is, incidentally, fairly consistent – of his reconquest. He landed at Dol, at the head of Breton troops, and routed the Vikings who were feasting at the 'monastery'. He then reached the region of Saint-Brieuc by sea and annihilated other Vikings, who may have been entrenched

at the camp of Péran, near Plédran. The following year, Alain resumed his advance and crossed Brittany towards Nantes. The Bretons launched an initial attack against the Vikings entrenched in a camp at the confluence of the Loire and the Erdre, on the outskirts of Nantes, but were repelled. Then, during a second assault, they forced them to return to their ships and flee.

Alain immediately made Nantes his capital and fortified its defences. However, Flodoard, for his part, noted in 937 the frequent skirmishes between the Bretons who had returned from exile and bands of Vikings. Nevertheless, by 939, most of the Breton exiles had returned home and Alain consolidated his power over the whole of Brittany.

Yet the Vikings had not had their final say. That year, they regrouped in the north-east of the county of Rennes, likely establishing a camp at Trans, not far from the banks of the Couesnon, from where they resumed their raids. Count Bérenger put up fierce resistance against them and then, in August, received reinforcements from Alain and Hugues the Great. Together they laid siege to the camp and drove the Vikings back. It was a decisive victory, marking the end of their presence in Brittany.

In 944, a Viking chieftain named *Haigroldus* (that is to say, Haraldr), whom Flodoard describes as the man 'who commanded at Bayeux ' – and whose support the Normans of Neustria had sought for their new earl, the young Richard, son of William Longsword, who had been treacherously murdered in 942 – took advantage of a rift between Alain and the Earl of Rennes to launch an attack on Dol. The town was captured and sacked, and the inhabitants took refuge in the cathedral, but the Vikings were soon driven back by Breton forces sent as reinforcements. Afterwards, Alain and Bérenger reconciled, with the upper hand going to the former, who was both Count of Cornouaille (a title replacing that of Poher) and of Nantes.

Alain Barbetorte died of illness in 952. He had consolidated his power and reaffirmed the religious autonomy of his duchy. Above all, he had driven out the Vikings.

Whilst the Vikings of the Seine, having converted following the first territorial cession of 911, integrated into Normandy under the leadership of Rollo and later William Longsword, and moulded themselves to the Frankish way of life, the Vikings of the Loire contented themselves with a military occupation of Brittany. Rǫgnvaldr was

above all a warlord, and Brittany suffered from successive and deliberate raids, the economic and human consequences of which are described in the *Chronicle of Nantes* in these terms:

> 'Only the poor Bretons tilling the land remained under the rule of the barbarians, without guides or support.'

It does not appear that the Vikings of the Loire attempted to establish their own administrative system or to take over the Breton institutions. Nor did they develop the commercial activity essential to the region's prosperity, as was the case in Dublin and York, but also in Rouen, where trade links were maintained not only with Scandinavia but also with the Frankish kingdom. If Alain Barbetorte was able to conquer such a vast territory with such ease, it was because of the territory's weakness. Unlike the Vikings of the Seine, those of the Loire did not undertake to rebuild the ruins they had caused.

In the 10th century, Brittany emerged as the ideal target for Vikings who might be described as 'hardcore', relying above all on this means of subsistence: nowhere else at that time did purely Viking activity reach such a scale. After 939, no Norse influence remained in Breton society. Nevertheless, the Vikings unwittingly contributed to the formation of an independent Brittany: their attacks on the Frankish kingdom bolstered the Bretons' determination to assert themselves in the 10th century as a Celtic state – before the development of feudal institutions and chivalry swept away Brittany's proud autonomy.

11
Is Iceland indebted to the Vikings?

> "They [= the Vikings] had behind them an entire culture, in the broadest sense of the term, an entire tradition; in short, an entire civilisation without which they simply could not have existed as such. And it so happens that this civilisation crystallised, so to speak, and reached its finest flowering in Iceland of all places."
>
> Régis BOYER, *Medieval Iceland*, 2001

We readily associate Iceland with the Vikings… Yet no Viking raid ever reached Iceland, and for good reason: the island was virtually unknown and uninhabited before the second half of the 9th century; only a few Irish hermits had ventured there until then – the *'papar'* mentioned by Ari *fróði* ('the Learned') Þorgilsson in his *Íslendingabók* (*Book of the Icelanders*, written between 1122 and 1132). But the discovery and colonisation of Iceland by the Norwegians form an integral part of what is commonly referred to as the 'Viking expansion', though without any warlike character whatsoever. It is to the Vikings (in the broadest sense of the term) that Iceland owes its history, but also its language and the richness of its medieval culture.

Moreover, the **Landnámabók** refers to the first Norwegian to discover the island as *a 'víkingr*': Naddoðr, who was already settled in the Faroe Islands, and who around 860 drifted from that archipelago and happened upon the east coast of Iceland – which he named *Snæland* (the 'land of snow') – as well as Flóki Vilgerðarson, who was the first to voluntarily reach this isolated island in the ocean and attempt to settle there: he gave up after an exceptionally harsh winter and named it *Ísland* (the 'land of ice'). And according to the *Landnámabók*, the first true settler, Ingólfr Arnarson, was accompanied by his 'foster brother' (*fóstri*), Hjǫrleifr, who undertook a Viking expedition to the west before joining him in Iceland around 870 (in 874 according to established tradition). Hjǫrleifr was killed shortly afterwards by the slaves he had captured in Ireland, but Ingólfr settled in *Reykjarvík* (the 'Bay of Smoke', i.e. the steam from the hot springs).

The *Landnámabók* sets out to catalogue, detailing their genealogy, more than four hundred settlers, most of whom came from Norway. Some of them, having fought in the Hebrides or Ireland, or even having stayed there, arrived in Iceland with a Celtic wife (or concubine) and slaves (mostly women). Archaeologists may have unearthed the remains of Ingólfr's farm in the basement of the hotel located at No. 16 Aðalstræti, the oldest street in Reykjavík. A predominantly rural society began to take shape along the entire coastline, with the southern plains being the most fertile and rich in pastureland.

The period of settlement (*landnámstíð*) is traditionally considered to have ended in 930, when *the Alþing* was established – an assembly for the whole island – in addition to the dozen or so local *þings* held in spring and autumn (as was the case throughout Scandinavia). By this date, the number of settlers is estimated to have been between 15,000 and 20,000. From then on, *the* Icelandic *alþing* would convene every year in June, bringing together the free farmers (*bændr*) around the island's principal chieftains (*goðar*), who numbered thirty-six at the time. These chieftains came from the most influential families: their role was originally primarily religious, but they increasingly consolidated their power by offering the *bændr* a form of local protection in exchange for their support. Consequently, despite its relatively egalitarian appearance, Iceland was not a democracy, contrary to certain popular misconceptions. Above all, it escaped the strengthening of royal authority witnessed elsewhere in Scandinavia at that time: there was no king, nor even a *jarl* as in the Orkney Islands. Ultimately, there would be no

central executive power. The Icelanders 'have no king but the law', as Adam of Bremen rightly observed in the 11th century.

According to Ari *fróði*, *'the Alþing* was established where it stands today' – that is, in the Þingvellir rift valley ('the plains of *the* þing') – 'at the request of Úlfljótr and all the people of Iceland'. Úlfljótr was indeed tasked with enacting Icelandic laws, drawing inspiration from those in force in Norway. Presiding over this assembly is the *lǫgsǫgumaðr*, whose task is to memorise the laws; he is required to recite a third of them each year: on this occasion, they are reviewed if necessary by the members of the *lǫgrétta* (legislative committee), who debate them together. But *the Alþing* also served as a court of justice, hearing disputes that the local *þings* were unable to resolve. Verdicts were typically based on compensation (*bót*): a specific offence warranted a specific compensation; and the most severe penalties were banishment (for a limited period) or proscription (permanent).

In 965, Iceland was also divided into four districts or "districts" (*fjórðungar*), each comprising three local *þings*, "with the exception of the district of the Northerners, where there were four, as they could not agree otherwise", explains Ari *fróði*. In 999 (more likely) or 1000, by a purely political decision of *the Alþing* and despite vigorous opposition, the Icelanders officially adopted Christianity. Now supporters of the new religion, the *goðar* had churches built. There would be as many as ten monasteries, and in 1056, the first bishopric was founded at Skálholt, in the south of the island, followed fifty years later by a second, at Hólar, in the north.

This was a prosperous period for Iceland. The population grew, the island's economy was fairly flourishing, and the Church introduced the Latin script to the Icelanders – along with numerous works, both religious and secular, which gradually filled the monasteries' libraries. Unfortunately, the fragile balance between the island's great families was disrupted from the 12th century onwards, and the institutions were no longer sufficient to control the rivalries between *the goðar*: quarrels, lawsuits, betrayals and often bloody conflicts increasingly undermined Iceland's independence – whilst the flourishing of its literature continued. The Norwegian king took advantage of this to interfere in local affairs and finally subjugate Iceland to his crown in 1262. It was subsequently annexed (along with Norway) to the Kingdom of Denmark in 1380. Having become a Danish province, and

neglected, it then entered the darkest centuries of its history.

Iceland's geographical remoteness, isolation and marginalisation are the root causes of its cultural conservatism, thanks to which it has been able to preserve much of what it owes to the Vikings, starting with its language, which has changed very little since then.

As the Old Norse language (*norrænt mál*) was spoken by all Scandinavians – who commonly referred to it as *dǫnsk tunga* (literally 'Danish language') – everyone could easily understand one another during the Viking Age, and even beyond, despite the dialectal differences that developed after the 11th century. As the Icelandic settlers were mostly from western and south-western Norway, their language was the one spoken there in the 9th century and formed part of the Western branch of Old Norse – as opposed to the Eastern branch (Old Danish and Old Swedish). In Iceland, it is known as 'Old Icelandic' (*forníslenska*): it remained almost intact despite the impact of Danish rule, and modern Icelandic remains very close to it today. This is not the case with Modern Norwegian, Danish and Swedish, which, having been subject to many other influences, have evolved away from the original Norse.

At the time of colonisation, the oral tradition prevailed in all areas. The settlers thus preserved the memory of their roots: on the one hand through poetry, sometimes very ancient but always popular – skaldic poems dealing with all manner of events, Eddic poems closely linked to paganism – and on the other hand through stories, whether historical or legendary, which continued to be passed down from generation to generation.

Western Latin culture (introduced by the first bishops) and foreign literature in general were quickly assimilated. Unlike the clergy in the rest of Europe, who formed a class apart, isolated behind the walls of their monasteries and writing texts with a strong religious tone in Latin, the Icelanders, driven by their passion for their diverse oral traditions, immediately put the art of writing at the service of their own culture, abandoning Latin in favour of their mother tongue. To adapt the Latin alphabet to the needs of Old Icelandic, accents were often placed above long vowels and new letters were

; *þ* and *ð* were borrowed from Old English – *þ* was originally a runic symbol, and *ð* a simple variant of *d*.

The Icelanders translated both religious and secular works, and soon began to compose their own: this marked the beginning of an intense literary activity that would last until the end of the 14th century.

Thus, Icelandic laws were put into writing at the beginning of the 12th century – the collection of these laws that has come down to us, known as the Grágás, dates from the late 13th century. *The Íslendingabók* and the *Landnámabók* are historical works. Around the mid-12th century, the first 'Grammatical Treatise ' (*Málskufræði*) is a valuable document (in Icelandic) on the Icelandic language of that period, covering both written form and pronunciation. Then, towards the end of the century, the Icelanders invented the genre of the sagas – which have never ceased to be read in Iceland over the centuries.

They draw inspiration in part from translations of medieval hagiographic legends and classical historiographical accounts, but it is the traditional Norse sagas that provide the substance, and indeed the style—which is at once realistic, dynamic and concise.

The oldest are probably those known as 'contemporary sagas' (*samtíðarsǫgur*), such as the saga of the Norwegian king Sverrir (*Sverris saga*), those of the Icelandic bishops (*biskupasǫgur*), and those of the descendants of Sturla Þórðarson (*Sturlunga saga*) – a collection of sagas recounting the events (from the early 12th century to the late 13th) leading to the loss of Icelandic independence. To these are added two sagas, one devoted to the history of the Orkney Islands (*Orkneyinga saga*) and the other to that of the Faroe Islands (*Færeyinga saga*).

And following in their wake came most of the sagas of kings (*konungasǫgur*), which focus primarily on the lineage of Norwegian rulers, notably the **Heimskringla** (by Snorri Sturluson), as well as the sagas of the Icelanders (*Íslendingasǫgur*): these, the best known, recount events that took place in Iceland, mainly in the 10th century, featuring the direct descendants of the settlers as everyday heroes facing their destiny. There are, however, no documentary concerns in the sagas of the knights (*riddarasǫgur*), which are adaptations of French chansons de geste, the romances of the Round Table or the works of Chrétien de Troyes; nor in the numerous legendary sagas, known as 'sagas of ancient times'

(*fornaldarsǫgur*), whose authors also drew in part on the Gaelic storytelling tradition preserved among the working classes descended from the large Celtic contingent (wives, servants, slaves) brought in during the colonisation.

In the 20th century, the *'Íslenskt* Fornrit' series, dedicated to the scholarly publication of the major texts of medieval Icelandic literature, standardised the language of the ancient manuscripts. Then came the first editions using modern spelling – and today the sagas can be found in paperback form, as well as in comic books and children's picture books. They form an integral part of Icelandic culture.

The legacy of the Vikings remains conspicuous in Iceland, which, thanks to them, excelled in every field during the Middle Ages: scientific works, historical accounts, literary creations (sagas, poetry), artistic achievements, and so on. Iceland has remained populated by their descendants (who are just as keen on genealogy as they were) and has preserved a certain image of their mindset and society – aided by the language and place names – which the sagas themselves sought to portray in a perfectly acceptable manner.

12
Did Ragnar *Lodbrok* and his sons conquer England?

'The young pigs would grumble [= Ragnar's sons]
if they knew the fate of the boar [= their father];
These snakes are causing me
pain; they thrust their tongues
into me
and gnaw at me painfully; I shall
soon die
among these beasts."

Ragnar's Saga of Loðbrókar, 13th century

In the autumn of 865, Danish Vikings – a 'great army of pagans' (*mycel hæþen here*), in the words of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* – landed in Estanglia (today's East Anglia, which was then a kingdom), led by *Inwære* (Ívarr), *Healfdene* (Hálfdan) and *Ubba* (Ubbi). The following year, they headed north and, taking advantage of a civil war tearing Northumbria (a kingdom located in what is now northern England) apart, seized York (*Eoforwīc*). The following spring, Ælla and Osbehrt, the two rival kings, joined forces to retake the city, but to no avail: both perished. The Vikings thus had an excellent base from which to launch, in 868, a first successful expedition into

Mercia (a kingdom whose borders roughly correspond to those of the modern Midlands). In 869, Ívarr and Ubbi led a new expedition, this time to East Anglia. They ravaged the country, which fell under their control following the defeat of King Edmund, whose death was quickly elevated to the status of martyrdom. In 870, the great army under Hálfdan attempted to seize Wessex (the kingdom of southern England), but King Æthelred and his brother Alfred put up fierce resistance. The Vikings renewed their attack the following year, but were defeated at Ashdown. Æthelred died shortly afterwards and Alfred, who succeeded him, forced the Danes to retreat towards London, then York.

However, new Danish contingents landed at Fulham in 871 and joined forces with the Vikings already operating in England. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* names *Guthrum* (Guðormr), *Anwend* (Onundr) and *Oscetyl* (Ásketill) as their leaders.

In 873, the year of Ívarr's death, Mercia fell into the hands of the Danes. Then, in 874, the great army split: Hálfdan returned to Northumbria to consolidate his power there, distribute land to his comrades-in-arms and develop York (*Jorvík*), whilst Guðormr occupied Cambridge.

King Alfred drove him out in 876, but Guðormr then set out to attack Wessex. He successively captured Wareham and Exeter, where Alfred was forced to make terms with him on each occasion, before retreating to Gloucester, in Mercia, in 877. But in the depths of winter, the Danes launched a surprise attack on the fortress of Chippenham and decimated Alfred's troops, who took refuge in the marshes of Somerset. In the spring of 878, having managed to raise a new army, he confronted Guðormr's forces at Edington and the Vikings were defeated. Under the terms of the treaty concluded at Wedmore, they agreed to leave Wessex and Guðormr to convert: Athelstan would be his baptismal name and Alfred his godfather. He returned to East Anglia, where he took definitive control and distributed land to his companions.

These are the established facts, marking the beginning of two centuries of Scandinavian presence in what is now known (in English) as the *Danelaw* – from the Old English expression *Dena lagu* (the 'law of the Danes'), which by the 11th century came to denote the geographical area where it was enforced, that is to say, the whole of East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria, where the Danes settled permanently.

Two 13th-century Icelandic texts, *The *Saga of Ragnar Lodbrok** (*Ragnars saga loðbrókar*) and the *Tale of Ragnarr's Sons* (*Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*), present a different account of the conquest of England, one rooted in the West Scandinavian tradition which attributes it to the famous Danish Viking Ragnarr *loðbrók* ('the Hairy-Trousered') and his sons. Ragnarr roams the seas in search of exploits, but when he attempts to conquer England, he fails and King Ella has him thrown into a pit of snakes. His fearsome sons – Ívarr *beinlauss* ('boneless'), Bjǫrn *járnsiða* ('iron-side'), Hvítserkr and Sigurðr *ormr-í-auga* ('snake-in-the-eye') – would exact their revenge on his murderer, and Ívarr would subjugate a kingdom in England.

This purely Norse tradition undoubtedly took shape within the Anglo-Scandinavian community of Northumbria, before taking root in the Scottish archipelagos – where, in the second half of the 12th century, the anonymous skaldic poem entitled *Krákumál* (*The Sayings of Kráka*), in which Ragnarr is the hero – before spreading to south-western Norway and Iceland. However, at the same time, the tradition also took root in Denmark (in Latin) in the late 12th and early 13th centuries. Around 1185, Sven Aggesøn, in his *Brevis historia regum Daciæ* (*A Brief History of the Kings of Dacia*; in fact, the Danish kings), recounts the conquest of Denmark by *Siuardus*, the son of *Regnerus Lothbrog*. And the *Gesta Danorum*, which Saxo finished writing around 1216, offers a rather different account of the adventures of the legendary Danish king *Regnerus Lothbrog*, representing the culmination of the eastern version of this tradition.

However, it was not until the early 12th century that this name, Ragnarr *loðbrók*, first appeared. Previously, historical sources mention two distinct figures from the 9th century: one is named Ragnarr, the other is known only by the nickname *Loðbrók*.

Ragnarr was the leader of the Vikings who sailed up the Seine and attacked Paris in 845. The *Annals of Xanten*, which Latinise his name as *Reginherus*, explain that he subsequently fell victim to a terrible epidemic, whilst the *Miracles of Saint-Germain*, which refer to him as *Ragenarius*, specifically mention the dysentery that struck him down upon his return to Denmark.

As for *Loðbrók*, according to William of Jumièges (in his **Gesta Normannorum ducum**), this is the name of a Danish king (*Lothbrocus* in Latin), who forced his son, known as *Bier Costae ferreae* (in other words, Bjǫrn
'iron-flanked'). Adam of Bremen, in his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg*, states that the son of *Lodparchus* (*'filius* Lodparchi') was named *Ingwar* (Ívarr), and that he was 'the cruelest [*crudelissimus*]' of all the Vikings. In England, the first mention of *Lodebrochus* is made by the author of the *Chronicon Sancti Neoti* (*Annals of St Neots*), written at Bury St Edmunds in the second quarter of the 12th century, when he refers to a magical banner depicting a raven said to have been woven by his three daughters (*'filiae videlicet* Lodebrochi'), the sisters *of Hynguar* (Ívarr) and *Hubba* (Ubbi). And the Anglo-Norman poet Denis Piramus mentions, around 1180, in his **Vie Seint Edmund le rei**, 'Lothebroc e ses treis fiz'. Finally, in the *Chronicon Roskildense* (*Roskilde Chronicle*), written in Denmark around 1140, we find the first Danish mention of *Loðbrók* (in the Latinised form *Lothpardus*) and of the Vikings whom it presents as his sons.

It is in Ari Þorgilsson's *Íslendingabók*, in the
1120s, that Ragnarr and *Loðbrók* became one and the same for the first time. Ívarr, responsible for the martyrdom of the English king Edmund (in 869), is indeed described there as the son of Ragnarr *loðbrók* (*'Ívarr Ragnarssonr* loðbrókar').

Not only is it unclear when and how the legendary Ragnarr *loðbrók* was forged from these two historical prototypes, Ragnarr and *Loðbrók*, to become the Viking hero of Scandinavian tradition, but it is also evident that his sons, no less legendary, were clearly inspired, too, by various historical 'models' from the 9th century.

A Viking fleet sailed up the Seine in 855, led by a chieftain whom the **Chronique de Fontenelle** and the **Annales de Saint-Bertin** name as *Berno* (in other words, Bjǫrn). It is this *Berno* who serves as the model for Bjǫrn *járnsiða* in the **Ragnars saga** (and for *Biornus* in *the *Gesta Danorum**) – as well as to *the Bier Costae ferreae* of Guillaume de Jumièges, who combines the story of *Hastingus* (Hásteinn, then known for his legendary capture of Luna in Italy, as recounted by Dudon of Saint-Quentin) with the story of *Berno* (drawn from Frankish sources). In his account, *Bier* and *Hastingus*, having come
'with the horde of pagans', sack the Frankish kingdom and together undertake a great expedition to the Mediterranean (859–862)

which, though shrouded in legend, is attested by Spanish, Christian and Muslim sources.

The *Sigifridus* of *the Fulda Annals*—that is to say, the Danish king Sigfriðr who, in 873, asked Louis the German to ensure peace in the border regions so that merchants could trade without hindrance—may have served as the model for Sigurðr *ormr-í-auga* of the *Ragnar's Saga*, the *Sywardus serpentini oculi* ('with the serpent's eye') of *the Gesta Danorum*.

Of course, neither Bjǫrn nor Sigfriðr have any historical connection with the conquest of England, any more than the Ragnarr who attacked Paris in 845. What, then, of *Inwære* (Ívarr), *Healfdene* (Hálfdan) and *Ubba* (Ubbi)? In 878, King Alfred of Wessex faced a brother in Devon "of *Inwære* and *Healfdene*". This is what the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* reports (without giving his name) and what Geffrei Gaimar confirms, naming him, in his *History of the English*: *Ube*, 'the brother of *Ywar* and Haldene', is defeated and killed in the Forest of Pene, and the Danes raise a mound for him. *Inwære* (or *Ywar*) may be regarded as the model for *'Inguar, filius* Lodparchi' of Adam of Bremen and the Ívarr *beinlauss* of the *Ragnars saga*.

As for *Ube*, he goes from being a brother to a partner in the writings of Abbon of Fleury, who, at the end of the 10th century, in his **Passio sancti Edmundi**, describes the Danes *Inguar* and *Hubba* (without mentioning any connection to *Loðbrók*) invading Northumbria and then ravaging East Anglia. King Edmund refusing to submit unless *Ingvar* converted, the latter had him captured, tied to a tree, flogged and then riddled with arrows. After which he had him untied and beheaded. The *Chronicon Roskildense* is the first account in Scandinavia to present *Ingvar* and *Ubbi* as brothers (and both sons of *Lothpardus*). However, the author fails to realise that *Ywar* and Ingvar are historically the same person and also makes them brothers. The chronicle describes, among other things, the cruel conquests *of Ywar*, 'who was said to be boneless', in Northumbria and East Anglia.

As the son of Ragnarr *loðbrók*, *Ubbi* is virtually unknown in the West Scandinavian tradition. However, the *Þáttr af Ragnars sonum*, following the account of the 'blood eagle' torture inflicted on Ella in York, reports that two illegitimate sons of Ragnarr, named Yngvarr and Hústó, tortured King Edmund on Ívarr's orders and seized his kingdom. Apart from the fact that the *þáttr* also distinguishes between Ívarr and Ingvar, one

One might imagine that *Hústó* is a corrupted form of *Hubbo*. Saxo, on the other hand, does indeed make *Ubbo* one of the sons of *Regnerus Lothbrog*.

And what of *Healfdene*? Admittedly, he never appears as the son of Ragnarr *loðbrók* in the Scandinavian tradition. Yet he is described as *Inwære's* brother in 878 in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which also mentions him in 874–876, when he took control of Northumbria and founded the Viking kingdom of York.

In 877, according to the *Annals of Ulster*, *Albann*, a Danish king, was killed during a battle with the Norwegians near Strangford Lough. It is easy to imagine that *Albann* and *Healfdene* are the same person: in which case his brother *Inwære* (Ívarr) would have been the one who not only took the city of York in 867 (as indicated by the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), but who would also have been king of Dublin in partnership with the Norwegian Óláfr *hvíti* ('the White'). The *Annals of Ulster*, which refer to him as *Ímar*, mention his death in 873, giving him the title of 'king of all the Scandinavians of Ireland and [Isle of] Brittany'. This simple hypothesis would, moreover, explain the divisions that shook the Scandinavian colony in Ireland after his death, but above all would personalise the close relations between Dublin and York: the Viking kings of Dublin who, in the 10th century, fought for control of York, were in fact claiming what they regarded as their inheritance.

If we accept that *Healfdene* corresponds to the *Halbeni* of *the Annals of Fulda*, he would also be the brother of *Sigifridus*. And we can then understand how *Inwære*, *Hubba*, *Healfdene* and *Sigifridus* were regarded as brothers. Finally, given that *Bier* (*Berno*) for William of Jumièges and *Inguar* (*Inwære*) for Adam of Bremen are 'sons of Loðbrók', it becomes possible to add *Berno* to the number of these brothers!

It was therefore within the Scandinavian world that the legend of Ragnarr *loðbrók* and his sons originated, subsequently taking various forms. And one can recognise or identify the events and characters – mostly historical figures from the conquest of England in the 9th century – that gradually led to its genesis.

13
Do the Vikings get on well with the Celts?

> " In our horn we we drank mead,
> In long draughts, upon the stormy waves.
> […] In Wales, I chose a girl for myself – For three days she wept, then she found comfort
> And our wedding was celebrated, joyfully, On the sea."
>
> Erik Gustaf GEIJER, *Vikingen*, 1811

The Vikings, who began arriving in the Celtic world as early as the late 8th century, undeniably spread terror and left a trail of destruction in their wake whilst conducting raids whose sole purpose was plunder. Yet whenever they chose to settle, whether for the short or long term, they influenced or revitalised these societies and became an integral part of their history.

In Shetland and Orkney – the 'Northern Isles' (*Norðreyjar* in Old Norse) – uncertainty remains regarding the early days of the Scandinavian settlement and the fate of the island's Pictish population. Some historians suggest mass executions or mass by the Vikings (as alone *the Historia*

Norway in the 12th century), whilst others suggest that the Picts had abandoned the archipelagos before their arrival (neither the sagas nor the skaldic poetry mention their existence). It seems, however, that a form of coexistence did take place initially at the end of the 8th century, and that Pictish culture survived to some extent during the following century, whilst the Norwegian settlement grew. According to the *Life of Saint Findan* (*Vita Sancti Findani*), he was captured in Ireland around 840 by Vikings but managed to escape whilst they were stopping over on the islands, finding temporary refuge with Christian Picts and their bishop.

But ultimately, and no doubt more quickly in the Orkneys than in the Shetlands, the Norwegians imposed a purely Norse political, social, cultural and linguistic model that eventually eclipsed the Pictish heritage – whilst apparently showing relative tolerance towards the remaining indigenous people: Pictish churches survived for a time in the Orkneys, and a few Pictish-style stones were still being carved in the Shetlands.

The fact remains that the definitive seizure of control over the two archipelagos by a single powerful family—that of *Jarl* Rǫgnvaldr of *Mærr*—around 860 facilitated the settlement of colonists, who were now free from the threat of Viking raids or indigenous revolts. For several centuries, Rǫgnvaldr's descendants would stand up to the Norwegian rulers; but what is more, these ambitious *jarls* set about conquering Caithness (on the other side of the Pentland Firth), part of Sutherland, and subsequently the Hebrides as well. Some took Celtic wives or concubines: Hlǫðvir married the daughter of an Irish king, Cerball; their son, Sigurðr *digri* ('the Fat'), married the daughter of the Scottish king Malcolm II; and others followed suit. Ultimately, the last *jarl* of the line, Jón, who was murdered in 1231, was far from being a pure Norse.

In the Hebrides – the 'Southern Isles' (*Suðreyjar*) – on the west coast of Scotland and on the Isle of Man, the Norwegians gradually intermingled with the local population.

Nor are the early days of their settlement documented in the sagas, which simply refer to the islands as a 'Viking stronghold'. Moreover, most of the pagan graves from the 9th century there belong to wealthy warriors or well-off settlers. According to Irish sources, it was in 795 that the Vikings ravaged the Isle of Skye and plundered the prestigious Abbey of Iona for the first time; the *Annals of the Four Masters* mention the death

of Gofraid mac Fergusa, 'lord of the Hebrides [*toisich Innsi Gall*]', in 853: he was clearly of mixed blood, as his father's name is Gaelic, whilst his own is Norse, Guðifreyr.

Innsi Gall means 'the islands of the strangers'. The Northern Hebrides (as well as the Isle of Man) would be the most densely populated by the Norwegians, as evidenced by the place names of Norse origin still found there today. But the Celtic population remained on the islands, coexisting as best they could with the 'foreigners' – a situation which nevertheless led to inevitable interactions.

However, as in the Orkney Islands, the sagas attribute the seizure of power in the Hebrides to a Norwegian family: that of Ketill *flatnefr* ('Flat-Nose'). Described as the first king of the Hebrides, he likely arrived there between 840 and 880, and his daughter, Auðr *djúpauðga*, married the Norwegian king of Dublin, Óláfr *hvíti*. But Ketill did not found a dynasty.

Instead, the title of king was subsequently adopted by all those who came to rule the islands, either in their entirety – such as Óláfr *bitlingr*, king of the Hebrides and Man from 1103 to 1153 (the Isle of Man was then considered the richest of the Hebrides) – or in part – such as his son Guðrøðr, who died in 1187 and was forced to cede the Southern Hebrides to the sons of Somhairle (in Old Norse Sumarliði), the powerful lord of Argyll. These kings fought time and again for their independence, sometimes against the Orkney *jarls*, sometimes against the Norwegian king, notably Magnús *berfœttr* in 1098.

In the Hebrides and on the Isle of Man, this coexistence gave rise to a blend of Norse freemen and Celtic clans. The clan spirit – the land belonging to the clan and the chieftain (or *rí*, king) who is elected – persists within the framework imposed by the Scandinavians, with their *bœndr* (free men) and the regular holding of a *þing* where affairs are dealt with. No doubt there were initially local assemblies on the various islands and, subsequently, perhaps in the 11th century, the Manx *þing* came to cover all the islands. This has left tangible traces in the legislative and judicial organisation of the Isle of Man long after the end of its political affiliation with the Scandinavian world – and even to this day: the *Tynwald* (from the Old Norse *Þingvǫllr*) is one of the oldest parliamentary assemblies to have never been interrupted.

It also appears that the Celtic, Christian community was exerting pressure in favour of Christianity: conversions became more frequent in the

10th century. But initially, the Christian religion coexisted with Norse paganism, just as it had previously coexisted with Druidism. The combination of Christian and pagan motifs (scenes from Norse mythology) on certain funerary crosses on the Isle of Man illustrates this. Some of these monuments, typical of Celtic culture, are also engraved with runes, evidence of the strong Scandinavian influence, which is also evident in the rich ornamentation of these crosses: interlacing patterns or characteristic animal motifs.

Of the 44 personal names appearing in the island's runic inscriptions, 33 are Scandinavian and 11 are Gaelic. From the 10th century onwards, the two populations became increasingly intermingled; integration was fully achieved by the 11th century.

Both the Gaelic and Old Norse languages persisted, but this mixing fostered bilingualism, particularly among the ruling classes, as evidenced by personal names. For example, the leader of Norwegian origin from the Isle of Skye whom the *Hákonar saga gamla* (*Saga of Hákon the Old*) names Þorkell Þormóðsson is called Torcal mac Dermot by the Celts; whilst Donnchad mac Dubgaill, a Hebridean king of Celtic origin, is called Dungaðr Duggálsson in Old Norse.

Human contact gave rise to numerous social and cultural exchanges. The Vikings brought their own expertise, but were also keen to draw inspiration from what they discovered. The decline of the Kingdom of the Hebrides and Man began in the mid-12th century, but it was not until 1266 that the Hebrides and Man returned to the Scottish crown.

In Ireland, following the initial attacks that targeted only the wealthy monasteries along the coast, the Norwegian Vikings stepped up their raids, led by Tuirgeis (also known as Þurgestr or Þórgísl), this almost legendary chieftain who, according to the epic account of *the Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* (*The War of the Irish against the Foreigners*) written in the early 12th century, is said to have landed in Ireland in 840 and founded, on the River Liffey, the settlement that would become Dublin (*Dýflinn*). From the mid-9th century onwards, the Norwegians also managed to establish a lasting presence at several other coastal sites – which would become the future Irish towns of Waterford, Wexford, Limerick, Cork, Arklow and Wicklow. The various Irish kings, forced to acknowledge their presence, did not hesitate to form alliances with

them to secure support in their own internal struggles, which continued to destabilise the country.

In 853, two Viking chieftains whom the *Annals of Ireland* name as Amlaíb and Ímar (that is, Óláfr [*hvíti*] and Ívarr) and describe as Norwegian – though some identify Ívarr with the Dane who captured York in 867 – founded the Scandinavian kingdom of Dublin, destined to play a role similar to that of the indigenous kingdoms. At the beginning of the 10th century, the raids intensified. One of Ívarr's grandsons, Sigtryggr, nicknamed *cáech* ('the one-eyed') by the Irish, considerably strengthened Dublin's power in 920, then succeeded Rǫgnvaldr (perhaps his brother) to the Danish throne of York. His own grandson, Óláfr Guðrøðarson, reigned over the dual kingdom of York and Dublin and knew how to assert his authority over all: he was as familiar with the customs of the Irish kings as he was with the problems of *the Danelaw*; he who plundered the monastery of Clonmacnoise in Ireland, won over the Archbishop of York in Northumbria. He died young in 941. His successor, Óláfr *kváran* ('the sandal'), was not up to the task: he was expelled from York and lost his hegemony in Dublin, where he nevertheless reigned until 980. His son, Sigtryggr *silkiskegg* ('silk beard'), repeatedly opposed Ireland's first 'High King' (*ard rí*), Brian Boru, who was killed in his tent during the Battle of Clontarf in 1014.

From the mid-9th century onwards, Viking chieftains forged political alliances by marrying young women from noble Irish families. Whilst the *Annals of Ulster* referred to the people of Dublin as 'the pagans' until around 860, by the 10th century they were known as 'the foreigners' – who gradually renounced their beliefs. In 1014, Dublin is described as an entirely Christian city. At Killaloe, north-east of Limerick, a fragment of an 11th-century cross bears a double inscription; one is runic: <**Þurkrim risti krus þina**> ('Þorgrímr erected this cross'); the other in Ogham: <**beandachtar ɒoreaqrim**> ("Blessed be Þorgrímr"). It was also in the 11th century that Scandinavian animal art began to flourish.

The Vikings became involved in Irish affairs and gave a boost to the island's economy from the second half of the 9th century onwards. They encouraged the development of trade and involved the Celts, who were scarcely accustomed to foreign trade. In Dublin, archaeological excavations have revealed the scale of this trade and of the craftsmanship

associated with it. The Vikings' expertise in shipbuilding also benefited the Irish: their specific techniques (keel, clinker planking, optimal proportions) would endure well beyond the Viking period. Archaeologists have unearthed, in Dublin and Waterford, fragments of ships dating from the 10th to the 13th centuries, perfectly representative of the methods of Scandinavian shipwrights.

Once they had overcome the hostility of the Celtic population towards them, the Vikings forged close ties with them and played an active role in the island's political, economic and even cultural life. Nevertheless, despite this integration—which was reinforced by intermarriage—both the Irish and the Scandinavians sought to preserve part of their own distinct identities.

To a lesser extent, Wales also attracted the Vikings: the island of Anglesey is not far from the Scandinavian settlements in Ireland and the Isle of Man. In addition to Norwegian raids, Vikings from Denmark, England and the continent also came to harass the coasts, sometimes spending the winter there. On occasion, Welsh princes would ally themselves with the Vikings against the threat from Wessex. After the death of Hywel *Dda* ('the Good') around 950, the Scandinavian presence grew – with the beginnings of settlement on the south coast around Milford, whilst Anglesey, to the north, was occupied – and persisted until the early 11th century.

Cornwall, on the other hand, where the Vikings confined themselves to a few raids, remained largely outside the wave of Norse settlement in Celtic lands.

14
Did the Vikings discover America?

> ‘After a while, Tyrkir said in Old Norse: “I hadn’t gone much further than the two of you. And I have news for you: I’ve found vines and grapes.” “Is that true?” said Leifr. “Absolutely, it’s the truth.”’
>
> *Grœnlendinga saga*, 13th century

Did the Vikings discover America in the early 11th century, long before Christopher Columbus? A number of medieval texts claim so, and archaeology confirms it, but we are unable to pinpoint the exact location of this new land which – without realising it was a new continent – they named *Vínland* (the
‘land of wine’).

In *the History of the Archbishops of Hamburg*, which Adam of Bremen completed around 1075, a separate chapter describes ‘the northern islands’ and mentions the discovery of *Vínland*:

> ‘Furthermore, he [= King Sveinn] also mentioned an island which many have discovered in this ocean and which is called *Winland* of the

> '…that wild vines grow there and produce excellent wine. And there is an abundance of wheat growing without being sown, which is no fabrication; we know this from a very reliable Danish source.'

But Adam of Bremen, who did indeed stay at the court of the Danish king Sveinn Ástríðarson, gives no further details…

In the 12th century, *the Íslendingabók* alludes to *Vinland* and mentions its inhabitants, 'whom the Greenlanders [= Icelanders settled in Greenland] call *skrælingar*'. Furthermore, for the year 1121, the Icelandic annals state that Bishop Eiríkr set sail in search of *Vinland*: this refers to the Bishop of Greenland, Eiríkr Gnúpsson, but there are no other known references to this voyage.

Still in Iceland, but in the 13th century, it is the sagas that provide us with information. The one that Snorri devotes to the Norwegian king Óláfr Tryggvason in his *Heimskringla* includes a brief chapter on the discovery of *Vinland* by Leifr Eiríksson. Other sagas also mention it, such as the *Kristni saga* (the history of the Christianisation of Iceland) or *the Eyrbyggja saga* (*Saga of the People of Eyr*), but two make it their main subject: they are therefore known as the *'Vinland* sagas', though they contain numerous discrepancies and obvious contradictions.

The *Saga of the Greenlanders* (*Grœnlendinga saga*) is the shorter of the two. Its author appears to recount, in a fairly straightforward manner, the traditions he knows concerning the expeditions to *Vinland*, and he presents Leifr as the dominant figure. The *Saga of Eiríkr the Red* (*Eiríks saga rauða*) is clearly more elaborate and focuses on the couple Þorfinnr and Guðriðr, effectively reducing the four successive expeditions mentioned in the *Saga of the Greenlanders* to a single journey.

Both sagas recount a chance initial discovery of the new lands. In the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, it is a merchant, Bjarni Herjólfsson, who, returning from Norway (in 1001?), stops off in Iceland and then, continuing on his way to Greenland, drifts towards these unknown lands. In the *Saga of Eiríkr*, it is Leifr who travels to Norway (in 999), where he is received at the court of King Óláfr Tryggvason, and who is blown off course on his return journey (in the year 1000).

This allows us to establish a sort of itinerary with landmarks between Greenland and *Vinland*: notably *Helluland* (the 'land of flat stones'), which is probably Baffin Island, and *Markland* (the

'land of forests'), in other words Labrador. In *Vinland*, three settlements are mentioned; two in the *Saga of Eiríkr*: *Straumfjǫrðr* (the 'fjord of the currents') and *Hóp* (the 'bay [connected to the sea by a narrow passage]'); but only one in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*: *Leifsbúðir* (the 'Leifr's huts'). *Straumfjǫrðr* is a base camp in the north; it is the starting and returning point for exploratory voyages in various directions, serving as a temporary warehouse. A considerable distance to the south, *Hóp* is a summer camp: it is here that vines and wheat grow. As for *Leifsbúðir*, from where explorations are launched but where it is also possible to harvest wheat and grapes, this could be a combination, under this single name, of the other two sites, but this is merely a hypothesis.

Both sagas show that the expeditions to *Vinland* were aimed at exploiting its resources, of which they provide an overview, with timber, hides, wheat and grapes featuring prominently. The emphatic mention in these texts of wild vines and wheat does not simply refer to some fanciful tale, to the fantastical notions prevalent in the Middle Ages – as Adam of Bremen explicitly points out by stating that 'this is no fabrication' – but to a reality that is to be found rather in the Gulf of St Lawrence. What they call *hveiti* (wheat) most likely corresponds to water ragwort (*Zizania aquatica*), also known as wild rice: this is a grass commonly eaten by the Indigenous peoples. As for the vine, there are several species, such as the 'American vine' (*Vitis labrusca*, known in English as *fox grapes*) and the 'riverbank vine' (*Vitis riparia*, known in English as *riverbank grapes*). As late as the 16th century, the explorer Jacques Cartier, whilst travelling up the St Lawrence, marvelled at seeing, amongst other things, 'wild wheat, which has ears like rye and grains like oats' and 'so many vines laden with grapes along the said river'.

The notion of permanent settlement is suggested only once, in the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, when Þorfinnr Þórðarson, nicknamed *Karlsefni*, after marrying Guðriðr, the widow of Þorsteinn, another son of Eiríkr, takes women and livestock with him "for they intended to settle the land [*þeir ætluðu að byggja landið*] if they could". But a return to Greenland is inevitable for every expedition mentioned, which lasts from one to three years.

Both sagas describe encounters between the Greenlanders and the *skrælingar* that were marked by mutual curiosity and mistrust. In Old Norse, this term, with the pejorative meaning of 'weaklings', refers not only to the Dorset and Thule peoples (in other words, the Inuit), but also to the Native Americans, specifically those of the Algonquian language family whom they must have encountered: in Labrador, the Innu (or Naskapi); in Newfoundland, the Beothuk, the last of whom died out in the 19th century; and on the southern shore of the Gulf of St Lawrence (New Brunswick and Nova Scotia), the Mi'kmaq. It is probably the latter that the *Saga of Eiríkr* describes at *Hóp*, aboard a 'large number of skin boats': we know that some people used caribou-skin canoes in that region. Peaceful at first, they engaged in barter; but subsequently the exchanges degenerated into confrontation. In the north, according to the *Saga of the Greenlanders*, contacts were hostile from the outset. This is, moreover, the reason given in the *Saga of Eiríkr* for abandoning the settlement: Þorfinnr *Karlsefni* and his companions realised "that they would constantly have to fear the hostility of those who lived there".

Several archaeological discoveries made in Greenland tend to confirm the expeditions carried out from there to North America: a Native American quartzite arrowhead, or even coffins made of larch – a wood that the Greenlanders may have fetched from Labrador (*Markland*), which was closer than *Vinland*, long after their discovery. Moreover, the Icelandic annals mention, in 1347, the arrival in Iceland of a Greenlandic ship, driven off course by a storm, which had travelled as far as *Markland* (perhaps in search of timber).

Scattered along the North American coastline, various objects of Scandinavian origin have been unearthed, such as a bronze balance beam on Ellesmere Island, a piece of cast iron and a bronze cup on Devon Island, a wooden figurine on Baffin Island, a silver coin minted during the reign of the Norwegian king Óláfr *kyrri* ('the Peaceful') towards the end of the 11th century, in Maine. Probably acquired through barter, they must have circulated either amongst the last Dorset people or the first Thule people, or amongst the Native Americans, and they indicate neither where nor when contact took place, nor under what circumstances.

In the 19th century, keen interest in the Norse presence in North America gave rise to so-called Viking 'relics' which are either not

not – like the Newport Tower (Rhode Island), which is merely an old windmill, the Popham Beach stone (Maine) with its glacial striations, or the Dighton Rock (Massachusetts) engraved with Native American petroglyphs – or are forgeries. This is the case with the 'Kensington Rune Stone' (Minnesota), the three stones at Spirit Pond (Maine), or the so-called *'Vinland* Map', on which Greenland (*Grouelanda*) and *Vinland* (*Vinilanda*) appear as two islands, with a caption noting their discovery by the companions *Byarnus* and *Leiphus*, Bjarni and Leifr.

In reality, the only irrefutable evidence of a Scandinavian presence in America available to archaeology to date is the L'Anse aux Meadows site, at the northern tip of Newfoundland, which may correspond to *the Promontorium Winlandiæ* on a map drawn up in 1570 by the Icelander Sigurður Stefánsson. The site was discovered and excavated by the Norwegian couple Helge and Anne Stine Ingstad during the 1960s, and its occupation has been dated to between 990 and 1030, which is consistent with the chronology of the sagas.

The three main buildings and their outbuildings, the foundations of which were uncovered on a natural terrace set back from the beach and surrounded by peat bogs, are not merely *búðir* ('seasonal huts') as the name *Leifsbúðir* ('Leifr's huts') in the *Saga of the Greenlanders* might suggest. These are genuine Scandinavian-style dwellings, with a large communal room (*skáli*) heated by a central hearth. Judging by the size of the benches along the walls, which also served as beds, it is estimated that the entire site could accommodate at least 80 people. The two largest huts contain additional rooms (*stofa*, *eldhús*) as well as storage areas. In addition, there are several small structures nearby, including three workshops and a smithy where a furnace is used to smelt iron ore from the peat bogs.

The absence of graves supports the view that the site was occupied for only a short time, as does the limited accumulation of waste. Another notable feature is the absence of stables, barns or even enclosures; the occupants appear to have engaged in little livestock farming, preferring fishing and hunting. And amongst the few personal items found – suggesting a planned, permanent abandonment of the site – some attest to the presence of women: a soapstone spindle whorl, a small whetstone, a bone needle, a bronze brooch pin and a glass bead.

On the other hand, a large quantity of wood scraps and shavings, an old plank, iron rivets in very poor condition, nails and forge slag were discovered – all evidence of genuine ship repair activity.

Two of the jasper fragments used for flintlock flints come from Notre-Dame Bay, a vast bay in Newfoundland (on the east coast) some 200 km further south, around which many Beothuk people lived at the time. Butternuts have also been found: these are from the butternut tree (*Juglans cinerea*), a species that does not grow in Newfoundland and is not found beyond the St Lawrence Valley and New Brunswick, the northern limit of the wild vine's range. Those who brought these nuts to L'Anse aux Meadows must have seen the vines…

And archaeologists have not given up hope of discovering other sites across the Atlantic, for example by attempting to locate them using satellite imagery, as in 2016 at Pointe-Rosée, in the far south of Newfoundland.

Does this mean that Newfoundland is *Vinland*? No vines grow there, and the hypothesis that *Vinland* should be read with a short 'i' (the 'land of herbs') is linguistically questionable – because the word *'vin'* would have to be part of the genitive form, which would result in
**Vinjaland*.

When the sailors who had set out from Greenland, sailing along the coast of Labrador, spotted the *Promontorium Winlandiæ* after a journey of 2,500 km, this landmark signalled to them the coastal regions surrounding the Gulf of St Lawrence, which, in their eyes, were best characterised by the vine: *Vinland*. L'Anse-aux-Meadows was undoubtedly their base camp. They still had to travel some 1,300 km before gaining access to the natural resources of New Brunswick or exploring territories further south, such as Nova Scotia and Maine.

For the small new colony in Greenland – barely more than 500 people at the start of the 11^{th} century – the appeal of *Vinland* did not justify the investment in manpower and equipment, and these long and perilous voyages, limited to the warmer months, to lands inhabited by unpredictable and armed indigenous peoples, would come to nothing.

15
Did the Inuit drive the Vikings out of Greenland?

> "The *Skrælingar* [= Inuit] attacked the Greenlanders and killed eighteen of them. They captured two young boys and a servant girl and took them away with them."
>
> *Gottskálks Annáll*, 1379

Put in these terms, the question defies all plausibility: even in its broadest sense, the word 'Viking' makes no sense when referring to the late Middle Ages. The question must therefore be reframed – thereby moving beyond the strict chronological scope of this book – as follows:
"Did the Inuit drive the Scandinavians out of Greenland?"

The *Saga of Eiríkr the Red* recounts how Eiríkr Þorvaldsson, banished from Iceland in 981 or 982, set sail westwards with a few companions towards a rocky coastline first sighted as early as 930 (by a certain Gunnbjǫrn Úlfsson) and discovered south-eastern Greenland. They then reached the less inhospitable western fjords, where they found good grazing land, and Eiríkr named these new lands *Grœnland* (the 'green land'). At the end of his exile, he returned to Iceland and gathered together the future settlers of this vast unoccupied territory. In 985 or 986, twenty-five ships laden with five hundred men, women and children, livestock and timber set sail. Only fourteen of them reached their destination. Eiríkr

settled in the fjord he named *Eiríksfjǫrðr* (now Tunulliarfik), whilst others settled in the surrounding fjords. This region in south-western Greenland, now known as Qaqortoq, was named *Eystribygð*, 'the Eastern Settlement': it would become the most densely populated area. Others chose to settle some 400 km further north, where the capital, Nuuk, now stands: this was *Vestribygð*, 'the Western settlement', of lesser importance and set back from the coast.

For more than four centuries, these two settlements were the most remote outposts of European civilisation in the Middle Ages.

Archaeologists have identified some five hundred farm remains in the Eastern settlement and around a hundred in the Western one. Many of them are very modest, and not all date from the same period or were in use at the same time.

The wealthiest settlements mentioned in the texts have been identified: these include *Brattahlíð*, Eiríkr's farm (now Qassiarsuk), and, in the neighbouring fjord, *Garðar* (Igaliku), which would become the episcopal see of Greenland upon the appointment of the first bishop in 1126 – archaeologists have uncovered the remains of the cathedral built from local sandstone there. These farms are situated on the best land at the head of the fjords; they feature a large communal room (*skáli*) and numerous outbuildings (often built of stone), including a large stable.

The *Konungs skuggsjá*, written in the form of a dialogue between a father and his son, describes, among other things, life in Greenland around 1250:

> 'You want to know what people live on in this country, since they do not sow crops: men can live on things other than bread. It is said that in Greenland there are good pastures and fine farms, so that they rear large numbers of cows and sheep and produce butter and cheese in abundance. They live mainly on these and on meat, but they also eat the flesh of all kinds of wild animals, including reindeer [= caribou], whales, seals and bears. That is what the people in this country live on."

Indeed, the 'Greenlanders' adapted their way of life to their new environment and to the harshness of the Arctic climate – which became more severe from the 12th century onwards: there was a significant drop in temperatures, which

resulted in shorter, cooler summers, poorer hay harvests and the need to keep livestock indoors for longer; and at sea, more floating ice hampered navigation. In the 14th century, temperatures fluctuated greatly, with some periods being significantly colder than others. Then came what climatologists call the
'Little Ice Age', a marked cooling that began to take hold in
Greenland in the early 15th century.

Strontium isotope analyses of the bones of around 450 individuals indicate that the early settlers consumed mainly agricultural produce, but that by the 14th century their diet had become predominantly of marine origin. This shift in their diet shows that the Scandinavians did not rely solely on livestock farming but increasingly on the bounty of the sea. The large number of seal bones found during the excavations confirms that they consumed the meat of these animals in abundance: these were harbour and hooded seals, which migrated along the south-west coast in spring, and which they hunted in the same way as cetaceans, using small boats to drive them towards slaughter beaches.

Furthermore, in early summer, the men travelled northwards along the coast to reach their hunting grounds, which they called *Norðrsetr*—presumably Disko Bay, more than 500 km north of *Vestribygð*—and even further still, as far as Melville Bay, as
attested by the Kingittorsuaq runestone from the 14th century. There they hunted walruses and narwhals for their tusks, polar bears and arctic foxes for their fur, in order to export these precious goods to Europe.

This is a comment attributed to Ívarr Bárðarson, a Norwegian priest sent to Greenland by the Bishop of Bergen around 1342 – 'Now the *Skrælingar* have taken possession of the entire western settlement' – which is traditionally used to date the beginning of the decline of the Scandinavian colony (the depopulation of *Vestribygð*, around 1350) and to hold the Inuit responsible for it. But, of course, we are a long way from the Viking Age.

Having appeared in north-western Greenland at the start of the 13th century, the Inuit were widespread in Disko Bay a century later. It is

This was therefore one of the most likely places for the two ethnic groups to meet and, presumably, to engage in barter. However, the growing presence of the Inuit at *Norðrsetr* and the increased competition for the same resources may have had an impact on the Scandinavians' ability to continue their hunting activities there.

Moreover, contact may have taken place all along the west coast, including in the southern regions colonised by the Vikings, which the Inuit reached during their own summer expeditions. Although this is never mentioned in the Norse texts of the time.

The nature of these interactions reflects the difference between the two populations. The Inuit kept the items they acquired and subsequently attributed a certain value (social, religious) or prestige to them, whereas the Scandinavians were primarily concerned with the commercial value of the ivory. And it is particularly worth noting that these exchanges were followed neither by inter-ethnic marriages – unlike the intermarriage in colonial Greenland of the 18th and 19th centuries, which led to linguistic and cultural transfers – nor by acculturation – the Scandinavians did not adopt Inuit techniques (umiak and kayak, harpoon, dog-drawn sled) nor their very distinctive practice of winter hunting for ringed seals.

Excavations carried out at *Vestribygð* have revealed no signs of violence during the final stages of its occupation. However, it is difficult to ascertain to what extent there may have been a period of direct contact, perhaps competition, or even hostility between the two communities. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Inuit only settled there permanently after the Scandinavians had left, which points to a fairly long period of relatively peaceful contact.

Among the Inuit tales collected in the 19th century by the Dane Hinrich Rink and published in Danish translation in Copenhagen in 1866 under the title **Eskimoiske eventyr og sagn** (*Eskimo Tales and Legends*), several centre on encounters—sometimes friendly, sometimes hostile—between *the 'Kaladlit '* (*Kalaallit*, the Inuit) and 'Kavdlunait' (*Qallunaat*, the White Men) in south-west Greenland. One of these tales, *Ungortok, chief of the former Kavdlunait of Kakortok*, may be based on real events, though these are impossible to date. This Inuit tale is set on the island of Arpatsivik in the Qaqortoq Fjord (*Hvalseyjarfjǫrðr*), in the heart *of Eystribygð*, and begins with a Scandinavian fisherman challenging an Inuk in his kayak: this ill-fated challenge leads to

a bloody clash between the Scandinavians, led by their chief Ungortoq (Yngvarr?), and the Inuit.

Yet *Eystribygð* shows no signs of destruction or looting. The churches are empty, but it may be that the Scandinavians themselves took the most valuable objects. And the excavations carried out at *Hvalsey* have uncovered no evidence of the burning of the Scandinavian farms by the Inuit, as described in the tale *of Ungortok*.

However, this tale is reminiscent of other incidents recorded from a Scandinavian perspective, such as the attack by the Inuit in 1379, as described in the Icelandic annals (*Gottskálks Annáll*), which resulted in the deaths of eighteen men and the capture of two others. For a long time, the interpretation of these written sources fuelled the theory that the Inuit had driven out the Scandinavians.

In reality, Greenland's Scandinavian community—relatively disciplined, socially well-structured, adaptable, and asserting its independence in the face of Norway's political and religious encroachment—sees its living conditions affected both by developments on the ground and by events affecting Scandinavia and the rest of Europe. Its greatest handicap is, without a doubt, its size: demographically speaking, estimates range from two to six thousand souls at the colony's peak. And it is generally believed today that the population barely exceeded three thousand inhabitants at the start of the 14th century. It is clear that any loss of even a few individuals (whatever the cause: departures, illness or epidemics, accidents, clashes with the Inuit, famines) leads to a reduction in the population which, in the long run, is likely to hinder the exploitation of available resources and undermine the social structure itself, slowing down or preventing the performance of collective tasks, or even leading to the loss of certain skills. If the social and economic structure cannot be maintained, those who remain will eventually leave.

> 'Everything necessary for the country's development must be purchased from abroad, both iron and timber for building houses,'

as stated in the *Konungs skuggsjá*.

In the early days of colonisation, the wealthiest families owned their own ships to travel to Europe, and by the end of the 12th century, they were among the merchants trading with Bergen. But less than a century later, they were dependent on Norwegian merchants sailing to Greenland and, in 1261, were forced to submit to the Norwegian crown, probably to ensure regular links between Norway and Greenland – and the Norwegian kings monopolised trade with Greenland. However, in the 14th century, demand for walrus ivory declined due to increased imports of elephant ivory; the fur trade faced competition from Hanseatic merchants sourcing goods from the Baltic to the White Sea; and Europe's demand for dried cod grew, benefiting Iceland but not Greenland. Furthermore, the Black Death ravaged Europe between 1347 and 1351, decimating the population. In Norway, it wreaked havoc in 1349 and caused the economy to collapse. To make matters worse, Norway fell under Danish rule in 1380 and, with the Kalmar Union in 1397, the indifference of the
The Danish monarchy's rule over Greenland comes as no surprise.

All this contributed to a significant reduction in the number of sea routes to Greenland: one a year at best – and everything came to a definitive halt at the beginning of the 15th century. Yet the Greenlanders no longer had ships capable of making the crossings. They were cut off from their main source of iron and materials for farm work and for building or repairing their boats.

The last written mention *of Eystribygð*, in the Icelandic Annals (*Nýi Annáll*), relates to the voyage of the Icelandic governor (*lǫgmaðr*) Þorsteinn Ólafsson, whose ship, on its return from Norway, drifted towards Greenland in 1406; he spent four years there and married Sigríðr Bjǫrnsdóttir, who lived in Greenland, on 14 September 1408, in the church at *Hvalsey* in the presence of witnesses whose names are recorded. Life therefore seems to have continued as normal at that time in *Eystribygð*. But for how long?

Archaeology shows, in any case, that the cemetery at *Herjólfsnes*, at the southernmost tip of the eastern settlement, was still in use during the first half of the 15th century. Three graves (those of two women and a child) have been dated to around 1435 : this is the last date

scientifically reliable evidence confirming the presence of the ancient Scandinavians in Greenland.

Whilst the mystery remains unsolved as regards the very latest period, it does seem, in any case, that the Greenland colony fell victim to an unforeseeable combination of several factors (demographic, cultural, economic, political and climatic), both locally and on a European scale, and that whilst the Inuit were moving into the southern regions, the Scandinavians eventually left the country entirely.

16
Do Vikings wear horned helmets and drink from skulls?

> "Fancy a skull, Batdaf?
> — With pleasure, Grossebaf! I never turn down a little skull!"
>
> René GOSCINNY and Albert UDERZO, *Asterix and the Normans*, 1966

In the Viking Age, the helmet (or *hjálmr*) had neither horns nor wings. In fact, only one such example has ever been unearthed – in seven pieces, which made it possible to reconstruct it – in 1943: it came from a burial mound near the farm at Gjermundbu, in Ringerike (Norway), and dates from around 950–975. It is made of iron, rounded in shape and fitted with 'goggles'. Two simple fragments of 'goggles' or nasal guards, dating from roughly the same period, have also been found: one in a blacksmith's chest at Tjele in Jutland (Denmark), the other at Lokrume on the island of Gotland. Furthermore, no saga or contemporary source from this period depicts Vikings wearing horned helmets…

It is likely that many Vikings fought bareheaded or wore a leather helmet (a material that does not preserve well), and that only the wealthiest owned a metal helmet – such as the horseman on the fragment of

the Baldishol tapestry (Norway), admittedly from a later period, dating from the late 12th century: a smooth, conical helmet fitted with a nose guard (and without horns!). This might explain their scarcity, which archaeologists lament.

The other known helmets predate the Viking Age, notably
the magnificently crafted 7th-century examples from the Swedish burial grounds of Valsgärde and Vendel in Uppland.

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, at the height of the Romantic era, artists and poets readily depicted Vikings wearing winged helmets, in the Celtic style. Charles Nodier, for example, describing the funeral procession of a deceased king in a poem entitled *'Funeral Song at the Tomb of a Scandinavian Chieftain*', published in **Essays of a Young Bard** (in 1804), attempts to provide some vivid details of the Vikings' appearance:

> "A hundred warriors surround him, in profound silence, with their long, sharpened wooden spears, their iron helmets and their plumes of eagle feathers."

In Scandinavia, it was not until the late 19th century that the first horned helmets appeared, such as the one worn by one of the warriors in a Danish engraving by Lorenz Frølich (1877) depicting King Sveinn *tjúguskegg*. But for another twenty years or so, most Scandinavian artists – including Erik Werenskiold in Norway and Louis Moe in Denmark – did not adorn Viking helmets with either horns or wings.

It seems that it was the proliferation of these horned helmets among foreign artists that eventually led to their popularity in the Nordic countries as well.

One of the oldest French illustrations depicting a Viking wearing a horned helmet (with two horns curving backwards, not out to the sides) is that by Henri Émy, under the heading 'Ragnar Lodbrok' in Louis-Nicolas Bescherelle's work, *La Mythologie de tous les temps, de tous les lieux et de tous les peuples*, published in 1854.

In Germany, the painter Carl Emil Doepler, commissioned to design the costumes for the 1876 Bayreuth production of Richard Wagner's opera **Der Ring des Nibelungen** (**The Ring of the Nibelung**), adorned a number of characters with horned helmets, including

Hunding. Admittedly, these characters were inspired by Germanic mythology, and not Vikings as such, but the impact was considerable.

In England, in 1893, the artist Frank Dicksee painted his famous picture, *The Funeral of a Viking*, in which one of the warriors wears a horned helmet. And in **The Song of* Frithiof*, an adaptation for English schoolchildren by G. C. Allen (in 1912) of Esaias Tegnér's epic poem, *Frithiofs saga* (inspired by the Icelandic saga *Friðþjófs saga frækna* and published in full in 1825), a colour illustration by T. H. Robinson shows the hero, wearing a horned helmet, standing proudly on his ship, the prow of which is adorned with a dragon's head.

But why are we witnessing, at from the last decades of the 19th century, to such a craze for horned helmets?

It is true that in antiquity, Greek and Roman authors described the barbarians of the North as wearing curious helmets: according to Diodorus of Sicily, for example, the Gauls wore winged helmets or those fitted with horns; and Plutarch describes the Cimbri wearing helmets designed to resemble the heads of wild beasts. But others depict them fighting without helmets, such as Tacitus, who writes that this was the case for most of the Germanic tribes.

Yet archaeological discoveries gradually became a source of inspiration for artists and writers, even though they were most often found to date from well before the Viking Age: between 800 and 500 BC
for the two bronze figurines discovered in 1799 at Grevensvænge (on the island of Sjælland, Denmark), which depict seated men, armed with an axe and wearing a helmet with long, curved horns. These horns are reminiscent of others: those in Swedish Bronze Age rock carvings, such as at Kalleby (Bohuslän), dating from around 600–700 BC, or those worn by two figures on one of the decorative bands of the smaller of the two Gallehus gold horns (5th century, intended for ritual libations), found in 1734 in southern Jutland.

Better still, in 1942, two superb helmets were unearthed from a bog at Veksø (Sjælland), each adorned with two elongated, more or less sinuous horns; the helmets were clearly worn during ritual ceremonies between 1100 and 900 BC.

From the Viking Age proper, in Norway, on two of the fragments of the tapestry found in the cart buried alongside the ship in the wealthy female burial at Oseberg (Vestfold), one of the figures is depicted wearing a horned helmet. And in Sweden, one of the two small bronze figurines unearthed in 1968 in a grave at Ekhammar (Uppland) and dated to around 800, wears a helmet whose horns meet like two bird heads (perhaps symbolising Óðinn's ravens, Huginn and Muninn).

But none of these ritual horned helmets correspond to the stereotype of the Viking warrior's metal helmet fitted with two bovine horns.

As for the image of Vikings drinking from the skulls of their enemies, it stems from a simple translation error dating back to the 17th century!

It was in 1636, in Copenhagen, that the *Krákumál* was first published. The Danish scholar Ole Worm, who received the original text of this skaldic poem, together with a Latin translation and commentary, from the Icelander Magnús Óláfsson, included the whole work – transcribing the Old Icelandic text into runes – in his book entitled *Runer, seu Danica literatura antiquissima* (*Runes, or the Oldest Danish Literature*), republished in 1651. Now, in this long poem which he is supposed to recite in the snake pit, Ragnarr *loðbrók* speaks of his impending death, extols courage and heroism as well as the acceptance of his fate, and rejoices at the thought of joining *Valhǫll*, Óðinn's hall. These two lines from the 25th stanza:

> *'Drekkum bjór af bragði ór*
> *bjúgviðum* hausa'

are translated as follows in Ole Worm's work:

> *'Bibemus cerevisiam brevi*
> *from the concave craters of* skulls"
> ("We shall soon drink the beer
> "in the hollow cups of skulls")

and accompanied by a note explaining that 'the heroes hoped that in Óðinn's hall they would drink from the skulls of those they had slain [*ex craniis*

eorum quos occiderant]".

In reality, *'ór bjúgviðum* hausa' means 'in the curved trees (or branches) of the skulls'. This is a *kenning*, one of those metaphors the skalds were so fond of using, which means 'in the horns', in this case drinking horns.

The first (abridged) French translation of the poem, under the title *'Ode of King Regner* Lodbrog', was produced by Paul-Henri Mallet. He published it in 1756 in his **Monuments of the Mythology and Poetry of the Celts**, or, in other words, 'of the ancient Scandinavians'. He was familiar with Worm's work and referred to his Latin version of the poem and his explanatory note to translate the two lines in question into French as follows:

> "Soon, […] we shall drink beer from the skulls of our enemies."

In the same year, in his *Essay on the Manners and Spirit of Nations*, Voltaire wrote of the 'Normans':

> "They worshipped Odin, and they imagined that after death, man's happiness consisted in drinking beer from the skulls of his enemies in Odin's hall."

In England, Thomas Percy followed suit in 1763 by publishing, among his *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry*, '*The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog*':

> "*Soon, […] we shall drink beer out of the skulls of our enemies*." And

he notes:

> 'Beer and mead were the sole drink of the Norse peoples. Of all the gods, only Odin was said to drink wine.'

It was also Thomas Percy who translated Mallet's work into English in 1770, under the title *Northern Antiquities*.

From then on, on both sides of the Channel, the rise of Romanticism boosted the popularity of this image and made it a recurring literary motif. It can be found, for example, in Charles Nodier's *'Funeral Song at the Tomb of a Scandinavian Chieftain*', which does not lament the king's death since, as the 'priest' proclaims:

> "His lips shall drink a sweet libation From
> the skull of the enemy."

Or again in Walter Scott's long poem, *Harold the Dauntless* (1817), which also depicts a Viking chieftain drinking mead from the enemy's skull:

> *"In wild Valhalla hast thou quaff 'd From*
> *foeman's skull metheglin* draught"

or, in the French translation of the poem published in 1822:

> "Admitted to the halls of Valhalla, thou
> savourest mead from the skulls of the
> vanquished."

What is most surprising, however, is that the error did not go unnoticed by various scholars, such as the Dane Carl Christian Rafn, who devotes a very lengthy explanatory note to it in his own edition of the poem, which he translates and comments on at length: **Krakas maal** (1826).

Moreover, as early as 1780, a correct translation of these verses (into French) can be found in *the *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne** by Jean-
Benjamin de La Borde, in which the 25th stanza of the poem is set to music in a short section entitled 'Ancient Scandinavian songs, as they are still sung in Iceland' – a few 'songs' collected for de La Borde by a Danish musician who had consulted the Icelander Jón Ólafsson:

> "Soon I shall drink ale there from curved horns."

Jón Ólafsson is likely to have been responsible for the translation of this stanza.

And in 1847, I. A. Blackwell published a completely revised new edition of *Northern Antiquities*, in which he endeavoured to correct Worm's misinterpretation of the *kenning*, which had been adopted by Mallet and Percy:

> "*Quickly, […] we shall drink beer out of curved horns.*"

He explains that this literally refers to the "curved branches of the skull", i.e. drinking horns, and that "it is this error that is responsible for the misconception that the heroes of Valhalla drank their beer from the skulls of those they had slain in battle".

Nevertheless, this image has a life of its own: it persists, sometimes through ignorance, sometimes through the deliberate choice of authors who prefer the more dramatic version. Thus Charles-Hubert Millevoye, in **Alfred**, a heroic poem dedicated to Alfred the Great (published in 1815), concludes the
"death song" of the skalds with these lines:

> "May we all, at the third dawn, drink from
> his bloody skull!"

But he adds this explanation in a footnote:

> "The same Danish word, which means *skull*, also means *a growth on an animal's forehead*. Thus, those who translated these two words in the same way unwittingly confused the ox's horn from which the victors drank, with the skull of the vanquished, from which they never drank. This error has given rise to a rather poetic tradition."

Vikings wearing horned helmets and drinking from skulls are now part of a popular culture far removed from historical reality.

17
Are Vikings dirty and unkempt?

> "They [= the Rus'] are the filthiest of Allah's creatures. They do not clean themselves after defecating or urinating. They do not perform ablutions after having sexual intercourse, nor do they wash their hands after eating."
>
> Ibn FAḌLĀN, *Risāla*, 10th century

In one of the oldest surviving Icelandic manuscripts, it is written, regarding Saturday, which is called *laugardagr:* the day "which in other countries is called 'Saturn's Day' [*sem á ǫðrum lǫndum heitir Satúrnusdagr*]". Indeed, unlike the other days of the week, it does not refer to a Norse deity – who would be the equivalent of Saturn (adapting the Latin *dies Saturni*) – but to an activity: *laugardagr* is the day of bathing (*laug*, which also means laundry). The word *laugardagr*, attested in skaldic poetry in the 11th century, gradually replaced another term already in use in Norway and Iceland during the pagan era: *þváttdagr*, the day of laundry (*þvátt*).

This shows just how much importance the Vikings attached to personal hygiene. Far from the stereotypes perpetuated in the Middle Ages and right up to the present day

, this image of the ancient Scandinavians is actually quite close to reality: numerous sources, both written and archaeological, confirm this.

Two Eddic stanzas, attributed to Óðinn, emphasise the need to be clean and well-groomed.

> 'Washed and fed [*þveginn ok mettr*] let
> the man go to *the þing*,
> even't he be well-dressed'

he advises in the *Hávamál* (*Words of the High One*), and, under the name of Hnikarr, he offers this further advice in the *Reginsmál* (*Words of Reginn*):

> 'Every wise man must be well-groomed
> and clean [*kemðr ok þveginn*],
> and refreshed in the
> morning, for no one
> knows
> where he will be in the evening."

But it is above all the sagas that touch upon the subject. What could be more obvious than this sentence taken from the *Þéttleifs þáttr danska* (*Tale of Þéttleifr the Dane*):

> "Then he [= Þéttleifr] goes to the bathhouse [*í baðstofu*], washes himself [*þvær sér*] and combs his hair [*kembir hár sitt*], then he dresses and takes up his arms."

The scene takes place in Scania, then part of Denmark. And in Norway, public baths are at the heart of the action in the *Sverris saga* (*Saga of Sverrir*), written during King Sverrir's lifetime by the Icelander Karl Jónsson. In February (1182), King Magnús launched a surprise attack on Niðarós, where his rival, Sverrir, had left a garrison: it was a Saturday, when many men were at the baths (*í baðstofum*); they were unable to defend themselves and many were killed. But Sverrir's counter-attack was not long in coming, also on a Saturday morning, as he too wished to take advantage of the fact that 'most of [Magnús's] men were at the baths'.

The steam room is also attested in Iceland: it was originally a small building, either separate from or attached to the farmhouse, where a hearth was used to heat

stones, onto which water was then poured to produce steam. The Vikings enjoyed this type of 'bath', which was generally taken after the evening meal (*náttverðr*), a fairly light meal, so much so that the time after dinner came to be known as *baðferð* (literally: 'going to the bath', *ganga til baðs*). In Iceland, the word *baðstofa* continued to refer to this room where one took a bath (with or without steam) until around the 16th century, after which the word came to refer to the heated communal room, the living room of traditional Icelandic farmhouses.

But in Iceland, it is obviously in the numerous hot springs (*laugar*) that people like to bathe, and it is also there that women go to do their washing. These are generally public 'baths', sometimes with a shelter, where some people travel from quite a distance, making them places where people meet (in a friendly or sometimes violent manner). There is no shortage of examples in the sagas. Thus, in the *Laxdæla saga* (*Saga of the People of Laxdalr*), which is set around the year 1000, Kjartan always makes sure to go to the baths at the very moment Guðrún, with whom he is in love, is there. And a short episode from the *Þorgils saga skarða* (*Saga of Þorgils the Cleft-Mouthed*), a saga of contemporaries written around 1280 by the husband of one of Þorgils' own sisters, begins as follows:

> 'One day, Þorgils went to Lýsuhválslaugar to enjoy himself, with his retinue. Vestarr Torfason lived there. His wife's name was Jóreiðr; she was beautiful. Þorgils and his men dismounted near the pool. Jóreiðr was there, washing clothes. Þorgils took her hand and joked with her."

This did not please her husband, who, seeing this, ran out of the farmhouse, sword drawn in his hand… The episode ended without bloodshed.

Icelanders are proud of their hot springs, as implied by
(in the 13th century) the Icelandic author of the **Bjarnar saga Hítdælakappa** (*The Saga of Bjǫrn, Champion of the People of Hítdalr*), in which the hero, Bjǫrn, in the 11th century, is in the company of the Norwegian king Óláfr, and a bath is prepared in a tub, 'because there is no other way to bathe in Norway'. This type of bath (*kerlaug*) also exists in Iceland, however, particularly in places lacking hot springs; several sagas

attest to this, such as the *Þórðar saga hreðu* (*Saga of Þórðr the Impetuous*) and the *Vatnsdæla saga* (*Saga of the People of Vatnsdalr*), though without giving any details.

Bathing and saunas, sources of hygiene and well-being for the ancient Scandinavians, were so deeply ingrained in their customs that they were included in the terms of the treaty concluded in 907 between the Byzantines and the Kievan Rus'. Among the rights and duties of Rus' merchants authorised to trade in Constantinople, the rather brief text of the agreement states: 'Baths shall be at their disposal as often as they [= the merchants] wish.'

Archaeologists have unearthed a wealth of toiletries at excavation sites and in graves (of both men and women), which bear witness to their cleanliness. The Vikings also made soap from animal fat and hardwood ash.

Various types of basins have been found. The word *mundlaug*, attested in Old Norse texts, refers to a basin used for washing one's hands before or after meals. This was clearly a common practice, mentioned, for example, on three occasions in the *Njáls saga* (*Saga of Njáll*). Inside a bronze vessel, likely of Irish origin, discovered in a rich female burial dating from around 900 AD at Kaupang (Norway), the inscription (perhaps incomplete) <**i muntlauku**>, 'in the basin', was engraved in runes. And in Denmark, in the grave of a wealthy woman, amongst other pagan burials discovered beneath the church at Hørning (Jutland), a bronze basin was placed on a low oak table beside the coffin.

The Vikings frequently used tweezers, usually made of metal (iron, bronze, silver), as well as an ear pick, which could be made of metal but also of bone or even ivory: the shaft, which serves as the handle and is often beautifully crafted, ends in a scraper shaped like a small spoon. These two items were sometimes attached together on a small chain. There are also nail cleaners, such as the one that forms part of the
silver toiletries 'set' unearthed with the Danish Viking hoard of Terslev (Sjælland), buried in the second half of the 10th century.

And it is the combs that attract the most attention, both for
their number – they became increasingly common from the 10th century onwards – and their craftsmanship. It is an indispensable accessory for regularly combing dry hair and beards, and for detangling hair

wet, having just been washed, which may rid them of lice. It is not uncommon for men to carry, along with their knife and sword, a fine comb in its case… which they will then take with them to the grave.

Some are made in one piece, from cetacean bone or ivory, with teeth on either side of the central section. However, the vast majority of Viking combs are made up of several pieces, skilfully cut and assembled; the back is slightly curved and the row of teeth, on one side only, is protected when the comb is slipped into its case, which is made of a matching material and shape. They are mainly made from antler (deer, elk or reindeer, depending on the region) or bone, and are generally finely crafted and decorated. It is likely that craftsmen specialised in the extremely meticulous manufacture of this type of comb.

Nicknames such as *hárfagri* ('beautiful-haired'), *gullskegg* ('golden beard'), *tjúguskegg* ('forked beard') and *lúsarskegg* ('lousy beard') demonstrate the attention the Vikings paid to their hair and beards. The beard was, moreover, a symbol of virility: in the *Þórðar saga hreðu*, for example, Ásbjǫrn mocks the 'maidenly cheeks' of the beardless Þórðr.

A handsome man named Jǫkull is described as follows in the *Laxdæla saga*:

> 'He had blond hair that fell in beautiful curls over his shoulders.'

This is probably the most common hairstyle for men, whose full beards are always well-groomed; they take great care in trimming them, and even braiding them. But there may be other styles, as illustrated by certain contemporary depictions of men's heads – such as those from Oseberg (9th century), carved from wood; the warrior with the conical helmet from Sigtuna (11th century), carved from elk antler; or those found on various statuettes – which provide several examples.

Women have long hair, as shown in various depictions. Young girls' hair is sometimes plaited; and, as a distinctive mark of married women, theirs is gathered into a bun or tied at the back of the head and covered with a piece of cloth (*lín*) – although archaeology does not seem to confirm this everywhere.

It is not surprising that some observers might have been favourably impressed by the Vikings' appearance – well-groomed, regularly washed, and dressed neatly and practically.

Unlike his Frankish contemporaries, Ermold the Black, a cleric at the court of Pepin of Aquitaine, paints a flattering portrait of the Danes in a poem from the early 9th century in honour of Louis the Pious, **Carmen in honorem* Hludowici*, whilst one of them, King Haraldr *klak*, accepts baptism. They are 'swift, agile and extremely skilled with weapons', he writes, and he admires their physical appearance: they are a people 'of fine features and pleasing in countenance and stature [*pulcher adest facie, vultuque statuque decorus*]'.

When, in the 10th century, Ibrāhīm ibn Yaʿqūb, a native of Tortosa (then in *al-Ándalus,* in what is now Catalonia), visited Hedeby in Denmark, he noted that both men and women wore make-up: they applied black around their eyes, which enhanced their beauty. However, archaeology has not confirmed this. At the same time, the Persian explorer and geographer Aḥmad ibn Rustah, in his *Book of Precious Adornments* (*Kitāb al-alāk an-nafīsa*), states that the Rus' 'dress impeccably and adorn themselves with gold bracelets'. And before mentioning the St Brice's Day massacre of 1002, the Anglo-Saxon cleric John of Wallingford writes in his *Chronicle* (in the 13th century) about the Danes:

> "They were in the habit, according to the custom of their country, of combing their hair every day, taking a bath every Saturday, changing their clothes frequently, and enhancing their appearance through many such frivolous practices. In this way, they undermined the virtue of married women and persuaded young women, even those of the highest nobility, to become their concubines."

In contrast, Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān emphasises the poor hygiene of the Rus' he encountered on the banks of the Volga. For although every morning, before a large basin brought by a slave-girl, every Rus' would wash himself, 'He washes his hands and face there, as well as his hair, which he combs out with a comb; then he blows his nose and spits into it, leaving all sorts of filth in the water.' And the others do the same in turn, using the very same basin that the young slave girl passes from one to the next, laments Ibn

Faḍlān – bearing in mind that Muslims must perform their various ablutions before each of the five daily prayers.

It is likely that during an expedition, the Vikings' hygiene and appearance sometimes left something to be desired… but, compared to other Europeans of their time who bathed only once or twice a year, they probably smelled less strongly.

18
Did the Vikings have slaves?

> ‘Erlingr always had thirty slaves living on his farm, in addition to other servants. He would assign them their tasks for the day and then, for those who wished, grant them free time and allow them to work for themselves in the evening or after dark. He gave them arable land to sow and let them reap the benefits of their harvest. He assigned a certain amount of work to each person so that they might earn their freedom by completing it, and many did indeed earn their freedom in this way.”
>
> Snorri Sturluson, *Óláfs saga helga*,
> *Heimskringla*, c. 1230

It is not known when slavery first appeared in Scandinavia, but all the evidence suggests that its roots are very ancient and that it was firmly entrenched in society during the Viking Age. For the Vikings, freedom was not so much an individual liberty as a collective one—belonging to a family or a social group—which is what made slavery acceptable in their eyes. Indeed, in many respects, there was probably little

differences between the daily routine of a slave and that of a simple free servant or a poor peasant.

Historians do not all agree on the number of slaves: up to 20% of the population according to some, far fewer according to others. There might be two or three slaves on an average farm, whilst the Scandinavian elite were able to maintain many more on their large estates. That the Norwegian chieftain Erlingr Skjálgsson, at Sóla (in Rogaland), in the early 11th century, owned around thirty slaves (if the *Saga of Saint Óláfr* is to be believed) seems plausible.

Among contemporary accounts, the **Vita* Rimberti* mentions the slave market at Hedeby around 870. The anonymous biographer of the Archbishop of Hamburg, a disciple and successor of Anschaire, recounts that the future Saint Rimbert, upon his arrival in *Sliaswich* (that is to say, Hedeby), saw a large number of chained Christian prisoners, amongst whom a nun deliberately drew his attention by singing psalms, as if imploring him. And the prelate, he explains, by the sheer power of his prayer, managed to break the chain that bound her neck. He nevertheless had to give up his mount to the slave traders in order to free the nun.

Slaves hardly appear in runic inscriptions. On the other hand, there are several references to former freed slaves (*leysingjar*). On two Swedish stones from Uppland, for example. The text on the one from Veckholm is badly damaged, but it is understood that it was erected
'In memory of Ǫlvir (?), his freedman' (<**-t a-ui (l)ausa s-**->), probably by a former master who held him in high esteem. And the one at Björkby has now disappeared, but the text carefully recorded in 1693 indicates that Holmsteinn, Ragnfastr and Eysteinn (perhaps three brothers?) had it inscribed "in memory of Fasti, their freedman, and of Þóra [perhaps their mother?] " (<**at fasta lusa sin -- þoru**>), a family clearly grateful. In Denmark, it was a freedman who erected a stone himself, that of Hørning (Jutland), towards the end of the 10th century. His name was Tóki; he was a craftsman (*smiðr*) and he did so in memory of Þorgísl Guðmundarson, 'who gave him gold and freedom' (<**is hanum kaf kul uk frialsi**>). The word *frjáls*, meaning individual freedom, is a contraction of *fri háls* ('free neck') – for a slave wears an iron collar.

The *Rígsþula* (*Song of Rígr*), an Eddic poem found in a manuscript from the early 15th century, seeks to explain the division of society into three distinct classes. It is difficult to determine the date of its composition, which is highly controversial, but the poem nonetheless provides a picture of the social structure during the Viking Age.

In this poem, the god Heimdallr, who claims to be called Rígr (a name reminiscent of the Gaelic *rí* or *righ*, 'king'), successively visits three couples of very different social standing, impregnating the wife in each case, thereby begetting the first of the slaves, free peasants and nobles.

It is , and , that Edda (' , Great-Grandmother ') gives birth to a son, Þræll ('Slave'). As he grows, his ugliness becomes more pronounced: he has a hunched back, a surly face and wrinkled hands. But he is strong and carries heavy burdens. Along comes a lanky girl, with a hooked nose, bow legs and muddy feet: her name is Þír ('Servant'). From their offspring sprang 'the race of slaves' (*þræla ættir*). The poem lists the names of their many children, names that all pejoratively emphasise the inferiority of their condition – such as Fjósnir ('Muddy'), Klúr ('Rough'), Fúlnir ('Stinky'), for the boys, or Ǫkkvinkálfa ('Thick Calves'), Arinnefja ('Hooked Nose'), Drumba ('Log'), for the girls – and it mentions their occupations, the most arduous or least prestigious tasks: they build fences, smoke the fields, tend the pigs, herd the goats, and dig peat.

The Icelandic sagas of the 13th and 14th centuries also stigmatise slaves, both for their physical appearance and for their cowardice or stupidity. Take, for example, Þórðr *huglausi* ('the coward') in the *Gísla saga Súrssonar* (*Saga of Gísli Súrsson*): this slave, so fearful and foolish that he agreed to put on his master's cloak, Gísli, whilst accompanying him on his flight, and, through his stupidity, was targeted and killed in his place. Nevertheless, the sagas also contain examples of mutual respect and trust between slave and master, as well as examples of children born to an Icelandic father and a slave mother who were raised as free men and forged a fine reputation for themselves. This is the case of Óláfr *pár* ('the peacock') in the *Laxdæla saga*: his mother, Melkorka (from the Gaelic Máel Curcaig), was an Irish princess captured by Vikings and sold in Norway by a wealthy slave trader to an Icelandic settler, Hǫskuldr, who made her his concubine. They are also mentioned in the *Landnámabók*.

Medieval law codes, written down in various Nordic regions, are a better source of information as they are based on older legislation, in force during the Viking Age and passed down orally. However, most of these texts, such as the *Gulaþing* Law in Norway, the Vestgötaland Law in Sweden, the Jutland Law in Denmark, and the *Grágás* in Iceland, were drafted in the 13th century, a period when slavery was drawing to a close.

Archaeological excavations have unearthed a number of artefacts that can be directly linked to slaves: such as neck irons found on the island of Björkö in Sweden; an iron shackle lock found in the harbour of Hedeby; or chains unearthed in Dublin, Ireland.

Near Dublin, for example, at Howth, in 821 according to the *Annals of Ulster*, 'a great booty of women' was captured by the Vikings; according to the *Annals of Xanten*, in 837, whilst ravaging the island of Walcheren (in Friesland), they took 'many captives'; and the *Annals of Saint Bertin* state that in 842, at Quentovic, "they massacred or took captive the inhabitants of both sexes". The aim was to sell them at a slave market. The slave trade would come to represent as significant a part of the Nordic economies as that of walrus ivory, amber, hides and furs. It flourished in the trading posts of Scandinavia: Hedeby and Birka were two major centres. And it was of real importance in trade with the Near East, as described, among others, by the Arab geographer Ibn Ḥawqal in his *Kitāb sūrat al-arḍ* (*Book of the Configuration of the Earth*) in 977.

In Viking-era Scandinavia, one could also be a slave from birth. Ancient laws stipulated that a child born to an unfree mother belonged to her master, regardless of the father's social status; and in Sweden, any slave born and raised within a household was referred to as *a 'fóstri'* – a word which, in Old Norse, also denotes an adoptive father or son. Enslavement was a sentence sometimes imposed on those who committed certain crimes. However, far more often, people became slaves after being captured and sold. Upon enslavement, which entails the loss of all rights as a free man, the new slave has his hair cut very short and, generally, is given a new name and must wear an iron collar. All slaves are regarded as commodities, and

in some cases, those born into slavery are legally accepted as a means of payment.

In practice, slaves did not constitute as homogeneous a social group as the *Rígsþula* suggests. In Old Norse, the word *þræll* (plural *þrælar*) refers to a male slave. The female equivalent is *ambátt* (plural *ambáttir*). Men are tasked with the most thankless or tedious chores; they till the land and tend to the livestock. However, some, depending on their skills, may be employed as blacksmiths or in other forms of craftsmanship. Although the *bóndi*, the free peasant, does not shy away from rolling up his sleeves, his slaves free him up, particularly to go on expeditions. Occasionally, a master may entrust responsibilities to a trustworthy slave, such as a servant (*þjónn*), or even as a steward tasked with supervising the other slaves – this is the meaning of the word used to describe him: *bryti*, literally, 'he who breaks (and shares) the bread'. Women worked outdoors alongside men, but also on the farm where they ground grain, milked cows, did the washing, and even wove fabric for making clothes and ship's sails. A female slave might also be assigned a specific task, such as serving in the household (*seta*), looking after young children, for example, or baking bread (*deigja*) – bread dough is known as *deig*. These distinctions are clearly set out in the Norwegian laws of *the Gulaþing* and the *Frostaþing*.

A slave has no right to carry a weapon, nor even to defend himself; nor can he receive compensation if he is wronged. However, one cannot kill or injure a slave with impunity. As the property of his master, he is entirely dependent on him and has no say in anything. However, the master, if he so wishes, may improve these conditions, and the laws provide for certain adjustments, which vary according to region and era. Not all slaves therefore have the same degree of dependence on their master. In Iceland, they may have some personal resources, most often by cultivating a plot of land that their master allows them to use.

Above all, however, a slave has the opportunity to gain his freedom. If he is held in high esteem or has rendered a great service to his master – if he has saved his life, for example – the master generally makes it a point of honour to free him.

A third party may also purchase a slave's freedom. However, the most common method of manumission involves the slave redeeming their own freedom after having raised the sum stipulated by law.

The manumission of slaves also gave rise to a ritual, marking their new status as *leysingi* (*leysingja* in the feminine form), granting them greater rights. This ritual and these rights are described in Norwegian law. The ritual consists of a banquet hosted by the slave for their master, after symbolically slaughtering a sheep: this ceremony is known as the 'freedom beer' (*frelsiǫl*). In Iceland, it is at *the þing* that the newly freed person is *lǫgleiddr* (literally, 'enshrined in the law'), with the rights and duties that this entails. However, the freed person and their children remain dependent on their former master: in particular, they must not oppose him in any way, on pain of becoming a slave again.

Following the conversion to Christianity, the existence of slavery was called into question, but only very gradually, as it was not one of the Church's priorities. With the end of the Viking raids, new slaves became scarcer and therefore more expensive, whilst a growing population made a free local workforce available. It was probably in Iceland that slavery declined earliest, during the 12th century, and by the end of the 13th century there were virtually no slaves left in Scandinavia.

19
Were Viking women the equals of men?

> 'There were once women in Denmark who took on a masculine appearance and spent almost all their time on military campaigns […] As if they had forgotten their natural femininity and had a greater taste for roughness than for tenderness, they sought war rather than kisses, blood rather than lips, and preferred the close combat of warriors to that of lovers.'
>
> Saxo Grammaticus,
> *Gesta Danorum*, c. 1216

Compared to other Western women of the same period, the Viking woman – the wife of *the bóndi* – enjoyed far greater autonomy. She would, however, lose some of this following conversion to Christianity, which she nevertheless welcomed. Nevertheless, she remained legally subordinate to men: she did not enjoy the same legal rights as them and played no part in political life.

As soon as she was married, often at a very young age, a woman became the link between two families, their traditions and their reputations. She continued to represent her own family, whilst having to uphold the honour of the family into which she had been integrated. It was a commitment for which she was appreciated and respected. Icelandic sagas readily depict her imparting lessons in foresight or courage to her husband or sons, and even urging them to avenge a grave offence by taking up arms.

It must be said that marriage is, above all, a matter of money (and, for the wealthiest, a matter of power). The Old Norse word for marriage, *brúðkaup* (literally, 'the purchase of the bride'), and an expression found in the sagas: *hón var gefin til fjár* ('she was given [in marriage] for money'), clearly show that this was a genuine transaction between the father of the future groom (or another male member of his family), who took the initiative, and that of the future bride – her consent not necessarily being required. The woman's dowry (*heimanfylgja*) and the husband's dower (*mundr*) are the two financial contributions to the new household, in the form of money, livestock and other goods – covered by the Old Norse word *fé* (genitive *fjár*) – which will be managed by the husband but will remain the woman's property in the event of a separation. Love therefore plays no part…

Moreover, if an unmarried woman gives birth to a child and the child's father does not disown him in the presence of witnesses, his paternity is legally recognised – otherwise the child is accepted into the woman's family. On the other hand, once married, a woman does not enjoy the same sexual freedom as her husband, since he, for his part, may take one or even several concubines into his home, whereas adultery on the part of the wife is a crime (as are all sexual transgressions).

With her hair tied back in a bun and her bunch of keys symbolically fastened to her belt, the married woman exercises real authority over the household, which is often large. She oversees all the daily chores, manages the servants and ensures her children's upbringing – indeed, she is perpetually pregnant and infant mortality is very high. Although she is subordinate to her husband, she participates with him in important decisions concerning the family. She may even officiate, on an equal footing with him, during the family's worship of a particular deity. It is also she who keeps their genealogy and the history of their ancestors in mind, and who maintains and passes on the traditions of which she is

. Furthermore, she is regularly faced with her husband's absence, sometimes for long periods, when he sets off on expeditions. She must then also take on his duties and make decisions with full responsibility.

A successful marriage therefore rests on the complementary roles assumed by both spouses, as evidenced by several runic inscriptions. Thus, on the Swedish stone at Fläckebo (Västmanland), a *bóndi* named Holmgautr offers this verse in praise of his wife, Óðindís: 'There will be no better housewife (<**hifrya**>, *húsfreyja*) in Hassmyra to look after the farm. " Conversely, Ragnhildr, on the Danish Tryggevælde stone (Sjælland) which she erected in memory of her husband Gunnúlfr, also had the following verse engraved: "Few men born to this day are better than he."

> During a visit to Hedeby, Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb noted the following about the Danes:
>
> > 'Their wives have the right to divorce; a wife may obtain a divorce whenever she wishes.'

It is true that in the event of serious disagreement between spouses, this option exists.

All a woman dissatisfied with her marriage needs to do is invoke a valid reason before witnesses—examples of which are given in the sagas—and declare herself separated. A woman may repudiate her husband if she disapproves of conduct that undermines her honour (insults, physical abuse), or even his sexual impotence. But whilst the procedure is simple, the practice is perhaps not as widespread as the sagas suggest. Not only do inheritance laws sometimes have serious consequences for the families concerned, but the spouse may also feel insulted, in which case the matter risks escalating into a conflict.

It is better to be two people to cope with the responsibilities of running a farm or an estate. This explains the frequent remarriages following a divorce, but also following the death of a spouse. A woman who loses her husband without having had children must normally return to her father's home: she once again becomes a member of his household and submits to his authority. On the other hand, if she has children, they take over the farm. It is therefore not uncommon for the father to try

to bring his daughter back home to reclaim the property she holds. But as a widow, a woman gains relative economic independence, hence her greater freedom of action when it comes to remarriage, which will be far more advantageous for her.

Whilst women's lives were closely tied to farm life and domestic duties, some women distinguished themselves through other activities. This was particularly true of highly esteemed seers and sorceresses (*vǫlur*), who were received with honour to practise *sejðr,* with its highly elaborate divination and incantation rites. Many of them are mentioned by name in Norse texts; and an Eddic poem, the *Vǫluspá* (*The Seeress's Prophecy*), generally dated to around 1000, features a *vǫlva* revealing to Óðinn and the other gods the beginning and end of the world.

Archaeologists have unearthed more than thirty graves of these women skilled in magic, mainly in Scandinavia but also one on the Isle of Man and two in Iceland: in each of them, a *sejðstafr* is found – a staff of varying degrees of elaboration (also known as *a gandr*) – which is one of the characteristic attributes of the *vǫlva*. Measuring around 80 centimetres in length, the sorceresses' staffs are all slightly different, but they are generally made from an iron bar, widened at one end to form a sort of cage and adorned with ornate bronze fittings.

These graves also contain unusual objects. In the Danish grave at Fyrkat (Jutland), for example, the woman lies on a cart and wears silver rings on her toes; she has a small box containing an owl pellet, a pouch of black henbane seeds (which produce a slightly hallucinogenic smoke when thrown into a fire) and an amulet shaped like a seat.

Furthermore, a few isolated skaldic verses, quoted in the sagas, are attributed to women: there is no doubt that women in the Viking Age also possessed the talents of skalds. Only a few of them are known to us. In Norway, in the 10th century, Jórunn *skáldmær* ('the skaldic maiden') recounts a conflict between King Haraldr *hárfagri* and his son Hálfdan in a poem entitled *Sendibít* (*Biting Message*), of which only a few stanzas survive; and Hildr Hrólfsdóttir, the wife of *Jarl* Rǫgnvaldr of *Mærr*, composed a stanza (*lausavísa*) addressed to Haraldr in an attempt

(in vain) to obtain the king's pardon for her son Hrólfr. In Iceland, Steinunn Refsdóttir notably composed two stanzas in which she sought to demonstrate the superiority of the god Þórr over Christ.

And not only do women have runestones erected (which is a public act), but some of them know how to engrave the runes themselves. This is the case, in Sweden, with Gunnborga, who signed the engraving on the Jättendal stone (Hälsingland) as follows: <**kunburka faþi stin þina**> ('Gunnborga painted this stone').

But did Viking women fight like men? Whilst the *Íslendingasǫgur* contain examples of women who, when necessary, took up arms to defend themselves or seek revenge, no runic inscriptions, on the other hand, praise them for any qualities as warriors. In the Viking imagination, the Valkyries stand out. But these female creatures in the service of Óðinn, sometimes referred to as *skjaldmeyjar* ('shield-maiden'), do not fight: they only visit the battlefields when tasked by him to select the warriors who are to die and escort them to *Valhǫll*. Saxo, on the other hand, takes pleasure in featuring several female warriors in his *Gesta Danorum*, though all are more or less legendary: the Norwegians *Sela*, 'versed in acts of piracy and war', and *Stikla*, who prefers to wage war rather than be forced into marriage; *Alvilda*, the daughter of a Gothic king, who takes pleasure in plundering the seas – and her daughter *Guritha*; or *Hetha*, *Wisna* and *Webiorga*, who actively took part in the almost legendary Battle of *Braavalla* (*Brávellir*) in the 8th century, during which the Danish king *Haraldus* (Haraldr *hilditǫnn*) perished; not to mention *Lathgertha*, who would marry *Regnerus* (Ragnarr *loðbrók*).

A few female graves containing the usual grave goods of warriors (various weapons and a shield) have been discovered: for example, those of two young women in Norway, one in Aune (Trøndelag) and the other in Åsnes (Østfold), and also in Sweden, at Birka (Uppland), where it emerged that the individual was a woman and not a wealthy warrior, as had long been believed. Does this mean they were Viking warriors? This is a logical explanation for some archaeologists, but others believe that the presence of weapons in their graves does not necessarily make them warriors. It seems that women may have taken part in Viking expeditions, but more for logistical support than for combat, if

according to certain contemporary accounts. In 872, the Vikings entered Angers, which the population had fled as their ships approached, and occupied the town. In his *Chronicle*, Regino of Prüm notes that they were accompanied 'by their wives and children'. Similarly, in the poem recounting the siege of Paris in 885, the monk Abbon relates that after their failed assault on the tower of the Grand-Pont, the Vikings managed, with great difficulty, to return to their ships, and that 'the Danish women tore at their hair and wept bitterly', urging their husbands vehemently to return to battle. He also mentions a Danish woman baking bread. And the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, for the year 894, refers to 'the women and also the children' of the Vikings entrenched at *Beamfleot* (Benfleet, in Essex), including the wife and two sons of their leader, *Hæstan* (Hásteinn). Later, in the 11th century, the Byzantine historian John Skylitzes mentions the presence of women among Prince Sviatoslav's Rus' forces besieged at Dorystolon (now Silistra, in Bulgaria) in 971. What is certain is that Scandinavian women were present when the Vikings settled permanently in colonised or conquered territories. By unearthing, from Russia to Iceland, elements of women's jewellery – if only the characteristic pairs of oval brooches, in gilded bronze or precious metal, used to fasten the dress at the shoulders – archaeology confirms their participation in the Viking expansion.

> Seeing these young girls married for the sole purpose of cementing alliances between

families, one can imagine the obedience and self-sacrifice instilled in them. However, if they have the will and the skills, some eventually become independent women – sometimes even manipulative or unyielding.

This applies in particular to the wife or daughters of *the bóndi*, but a great many women of the Viking Age—concubines, servants, slaves—did not enjoy these privileges! Conversely, in aristocratic circles, other women attained high social status, as reflected in the rich grave goods found in their tombs, or even their fame – such as Þyri, the wife of the Danish king Gormr, whose name appears on no fewer than four runestones, and who is described as

<**tanmarkaR but**> ('ornament of Denmark') on one of them.

20
Did the Vikings have a taste for art?

> ‘Once the money had been raised, it was decided to ask some goldsmiths [*smiðar*] to refine the metal and then make it into a cloak pin [*feldardálkr*]. Once the goldsmiths’ wages had been paid, the brooch was still worth fifty marks. They sent it to Eyvindr, but he had the jewel broken up and used it to buy cattle.”
>
> Snorri Sturluson,
> *Haralds saga gráfeldar*,
> *Heimskringla*, c. 1230

The Vikings did not have a specific word for ‘art’ or ‘artist’ in the sense we understand it today. For them, art does not seem to be an end in itself. In Old Norse texts, there is often mention of *the smiðr*, who is a craftsman – the material he works with is sometimes specified by combining words: for example, he is *a járnsmiðr* if it is iron, *a gullsmiðr* if it is gold, or *a trésmiðr* if it is wood. Yet from the Viking Age onwards, and even before, functionality and aesthetics went hand in hand throughout Scandinavia. Objects of all kinds had to be both practical

and beautiful, and the wealthier a family is, the more they can afford the luxury of owning superbly decorated items.

The true originality of Viking art lies in its decorative nature, which tends towards the abstract without ever quite reaching it. Yet they became masters of a very distinctive style: the animalistic style. It can be found everywhere, from their clothing to their weapons, from their dwellings to their ships, and on all kinds of materials: metal, ivory, wood, bone, stone, leather…

It was during the 7th and 8th centuries that, alongside snakes, four-legged animals and semi-naturalistic birds, a multitude of stylised animal profiles gradually emerged, featuring long, slender limbs that stretched out and intertwined to form loops: these would become the defining motif of Viking art. Then, during the second half of the 8th century (and for over a century), the highly characteristic 'clinging beast' appeared, named by a Swedish archaeologist in 1919: *gripdjur*. It is a rather stocky animal, somewhat more realistic but not to the point of being identifiable – a sort of feline, perhaps. Its head is always facing forwards, it has large eyes, and it twists and claws at anything nearby with its front and hind legs.

These are the motifs found throughout southern Scandinavia around the year 800: such as on the twenty or so gilded bronze harness fittings unearthed on the island of Gotland in the Broa burial, on the oval brooches discovered at Berdal (in Norway) or at Lisbjerg (in Denmark), and notably on the carved furnishings of the Oseberg ship burial – from which the style of that period takes its name.

The 'Oseberg style' (which lasted until around 875) reached its most impressive expression in the four wooden posts with animal heads found inside the burial ship: each is just over fifty centimetres tall, with a long, slightly curved neck and a menacing snout. The head of one is decorated with two intertwined animal figures and a latticework pattern; the entire neck and head of another are entirely covered with a multitude of clinging beasts; as for the last two, carved in high relief, they combine ancient motifs and the clinging beasts in an original way, intertwining them with a profusion of detail and creating effects of light and shadow. The most surprising thing is that the four posts nevertheless give the impression of genuine animality.

In the same region of Vestfold, at Borre, around fifty gilded bronze harness fittings and four pairs of stirrups, dating from around 900, were also found in a burial mound. Their style differs from that of Oseberg and has earned them the name ‘Borre style’. Predominantly practised in the second half of the 9th century and the first half of the 10th, it is characterised by fairly compact compositions of twisted bands and clinging animals, often featuring geometric shapes, particularly circles and squares. The clinging creatures, always present and shown from the front, have evolved: they are slimmer, more supple, and adopt highly acrobatic poses. A few acanthus or vine leaves also appear.

This style is found on many small objects, particularly jewellery, such as the pendants discovered at Hedeby and Tissø (Denmark), and brooches: three-lobed fibulae used by women to fasten their cloaks across the chest, such as the bronze one found at Blaker in Oppland (Norway); ring-shaped fibulae that fasten men’s cloaks at the shoulder, such as the silver one discovered at Birka (Sweden). Popular in Scandinavia, it spread throughout the Scandinavian sphere of influence, from Iceland – as seen on the small plate connecting the chains of a circular brooch found at Vað – to Russia – with the bird-shaped clasps unearthed near Yaroslavl – via England, where a mould used to make brooches has been unearthed. Indeed, whilst the simplest objects are made in the same way as the originals, brooches are often produced using moulds.

During the first half of the 10th century, in Denmark, another style emerged, the ‘Jelling style’, characterised by the decoration on a silver cup, inlaid with niello and gilded, found precisely in the northern burial mound at Jelling: two animals in profile, their mouths open, are intertwined in an S-shape. Although seemingly simple, it is in fact the result of remarkable craftsmanship. This style, in which ribboned animals are the sole motif, also enjoyed great popularity for the decoration of fine objects.

Then, in the second half of the 10th century, the ‘Mammen style’—which drew on both the Borre and Jelling styles—owes its name to the ceremonial axe with a gold-inlaid and silver-damascened blade discovered at Mammen, Denmark, in a burial mound dating from around 970. One side bears a plant motif and the other features a bird-headed creature,

whose visible rim features a clearly defined spiral: there is no symmetry in the design of the motif, but rather a sense of life and movement. The caskets from Cammin (in Poland) and Bamberg (in southern Germany) illustrate Mammen's style towards the end of his career. The first (of which only one copy remains) is covered with elk-antler plaques, the second with walrus-ivory plaques; they are decorated with 'great beasts', snakes, birds and masks, all set within an entwined pattern of acanthus leaves. Mammen's style is found on numerous objects and is also that of the decoration on the great Jelling Rune Stone, erected by Haraldr *blátǫnn* around 960–970: on one of its three sides, one can see a
'great beast' fighting a serpent.

At the turn of the century, a new style emerged, likely in Denmark as well, building on the Mammen style whilst accentuating its features, and drawing on both Anglo-Saxon influences and Christian motifs: this is the 'Ringerike style', named after the Norwegian province north of Oslo, whose pink sandstone was used for several superbly decorated runestones in this style. However, it is the one from Vang – carved from slate and located in Oppland – that is often cited as the benchmark: a double vine rises in asymmetrical arabesques and crosses to form a rosette, beneath a lion walking towards a small spiral.

Several ship's weather vanes made of gilded metal, sometimes openwork, are also examples of this style, such as the one from Heggen Church (in Norway), where two lions are depicted on one side and a snake facing a bird on the other.

Finally, around 1025, a final style brought the long evolution of Viking art to a close: the 'Urnes style', which would prevail for around a hundred years before being absorbed by the Romanesque art that came to dominate in the 12th century. This style takes its name from the small Norwegian stave church at Urnes, in Sogn. Rebuilt in the 12th century, it has preserved remnants of the first church built on the same site a century earlier: these are the carvings on the north wall and the old north portal. Unlike those of Mammen and Ringerike, the Urnes style is essentially zoomorphic: plant motifs or purely geometric designs give way to large, highly stylised quadrupeds, slender animals and snakes – whose intertwining forms are arranged in large open loops, whilst the heads with almond-shaped eyes and the legs become elongated and

taper off. This style was used to decorate wooden churches throughout Scandinavia. In Denmark, for example, a fragment of a carved plank, dated to around 1070, from the wooden church that once stood on the site of the present-day Romanesque stone church at Hørning, features figure-eight-shaped loops of slender animal figures that would have formed part of a characteristic frieze.

The Urnes style, which was very popular, can be found on the majority of the numerous Swedish runestones, particularly in Uppland, dating from the 11th and 12th centuries, half of which are also adorned with a Christian cross. An elegant 'runic serpent' (or sometimes two), with the runic text winding through its sinuous body, is harmoniously arranged on the standing stone, and occasionally one or more slender creatures are depicted coiling around it (as on the stones at Lingsberg or Sjusta).

The popularity of this style is also evident from the very large number of openwork brooches found throughout the Nordic countries, featuring a stylised large animal entwined with snakes, or sometimes with thread-like plant motifs. One of the finest examples is the silver brooch, dated to around 1100, found at Tröllaskógur in Iceland, which depicts a 'great beast' with a long, sinuous body and legs studded with two rows of nielloed dots, entwined by two snakes. A mould used to cast bronze versions of this type of fibula, dating from the early 12th century, was unearthed in Lund (in Scania).

Whilst Viking decorative art is particularly well documented, this is unfortunately not the case for figurative art, despite some concrete evidence.

Indeed, in his *Ragnarsdrápa* (*Poem on Ragnarr*), the Norwegian skald Bragi Boddason describes, around 850, the mythological scenes painted on a ceremonial shield, such as that of the goddess Gefjón driving her plough or the god Þórr fishing for the serpent of Miðgarðr. And around 985, the Icelandic skald Úlfr Uggason, in his *Húsdrápa* (*Poem on the House*), describes the tapestries adorning *Óláfr pár's* hall at Hjarðarholt, which depict, among other things, the swimming contest between Loki and Heimdallr and Baldr's descent into the realm of the dead.

Only fragments of tapestries remain: in Norway, those from Oseberg and Tune (Vestfold), dating from the 9th and 10th centuries respectively, and in

Sweden, those from Överhogdal (Härjedalen) and Skog (Hälsingland), from the 11th and 12th centuries – the interpretation of the narrative scenes in which remains difficult. On the small fragment from Tune, for example, the depiction of a group of men and women by a boat is reminiscent of the recurring theme of the boat and the journey (to the afterlife?) found on the carved stones of Gotland.

Admittedly, the legend of Sigurðr, the slayer of Fáfnir, was carved in the 11th century on the rock slab at Ramsund in Sweden, and it is carved in wood in Norway, on the portal of the stave church at Hylestad (c. 1200). The scene of Gunnar in the snake pit, depicted on the Oseberg ship, is reproduced two centuries later on the Swedish runestone at Västerljung (Södermanland). And the god Þórr fishing for the serpent of Miðgarðr, on the Swedish runestone at Altuna, also appears in Denmark on a simple stone discovered during excavations at the church in Hørdum, in northern Jutland; whilst Óðinn, devoured by the wolf Fenrir during Ragnarǫk, is depicted on the Ledberg runestone (Östergötland) and on a cross from the Isle of Man carved in the 10th century.

However, in addition to these few heroic and mythological motifs – which were to be succeeded in greater numbers by Christian figurative representations in the 12th century – the Vikings have left us rare examples of an apparent realism depicting everyday life, notably on several runestones: a peasant (woodcutter) with his axe over his shoulder, on one of the stones at Hunnestad (Skåne); two men seated at a gaming table, on the Ockelbo stone (Gästrikland); and a whole winter scene of elk hunting, on the Böcksta stone (Uppland).

The fact remains that Scandinavian ornamental art made a strong impression outside Scandinavia, influencing, among other things, the decoration of the finest treasures of the Irish Church: the Ringerike style can be seen on the Clonmacnoise crozier (11th century) and the Urnes style on the magnificent Cross of Cong, commissioned by the King of Connacht around 1125. This is a testament to the immense interest that 'Viking art' managed to generate!

21
Do ‘beast warriors’ exist?

> ‘In battle, Óðinn had the power to render his enemies blind or deaf or cowardly, and their weapons cut no more than sticks. In contrast, his own men went without armour and were raving like dogs or wolves; they gnawed at their shields and were as strong as bears or bulls. They slaughtered people, but neither fire nor iron had any effect on them. This is what is known as the *berserksgangr* [literally, ‘the *berserkr’s* march’].”
>
> Snorri Sturluson, *Ynglinga saga*, *Heimskringla*, c. 1230

The term ‘wild warriors’, now commonly used in French, is a neologism coined by Georges Dumézil, who first used it in 1939 in his book **Myths and Gods of the Germanic Peoples**. It conveniently groups the *berserkir* and the *úlfhéðnar* under a single term, though it does not correspond to the literal meaning of either of these two Old Norse terms.

The etymology of the word *berserkr*, composed of two elements, is a matter of controversy because, whilst the second is undeniably *serkr* (literally 'shirt', 'tunic'), the former has given rise to two hypotheses. For some, it derives from the adjective *berr* ('naked'), and the word would then mean 'naked, without a shirt', or even 'in a simple shirt' – as interpreted by Snorri in the early 13th century, when he wrote in *the Ynglinga saga*: 'They went without chainmail [*brynjalausir*]. ' For others, it derives from the root **ber*, preserved in Old Norse only in the feminine noun *bera* (bear) – as it was very early on supplanted by another root to form the masculine *bjǫrn* (bear) – and the word would mean:
'bear shirt', in other words 'bear skin', as *serkr* can mean 'cloak' or 'fur'. This latter interpretation is the one most widely accepted today.

By metonymy, the word *berserkr* therefore refers – at least originally – to a warrior clad in an animal pelt, that of a bear, in parallel with the second term: *úlfhéðinn*. Etymologically, the latter is composed of *úlfr* ('wolf') and *héðinn* ('fur', 'skin'); it means
'wolf's fur' and refers, also by metonymy, to a beast-like warrior clad in another animal skin, that of a wolf. This is, in fact, how the *úlfhéðnar* are described, also in the 13th century, in the *Vatnsdæla saga*:
'They wore wolf-skins in place of chainmail [*vargstakka fyrir brynjur*].'

Archaeology offers a few rare but valuable insights into the existence of beast-warriors during the Viking Age. In Norway, on one of the fragments of the Oseberg tapestry—which some believe depicts the famous Battle of *Brávellir*—one warrior among the others undeniably catches the eye: he has the appearance of a bear (from head to toe), holds a shield and points his spear downwards – an image undoubtedly familiar to *the berserkers* of that era. Furthermore, facing him is a strange figure, apparently one-eyed, wearing a helmet topped with long horns, who could represent Óðinn. In Sweden, from the same period, one of the small figurines from Ekhammar depicts a figure clad in a short tunic and wearing a mask with pointed teeth, perhaps that of a wolf. And in Denmark, two animal masks were discovered in the caulking of a 10th-century ship in the ancient port of Hedeby.

Beast-warriors are first mentioned in the *Hrafnsmál*, a poem composed in the late 9th century by Þorbjǫrn *hornklofi*,

several stanzas of which are quoted in a chronicle of the Norwegian kings entitled *Fagrskinna* (*Beautiful Parchment*), written in Norway in the 13th century, and in Snorri's *Haralds saga hárfagra* (which forms part of the *Heimskringla*). The berserkers are mentioned in two stanzas of the dialogue between the Valkyrie and the raven who witnessed Haraldr's exploits. She asks him:

> 'I wish to ask you about the equipment of
> *the berserkir*,
> drinker of the sea of corpses […]"

And the raven replies:

> "They are called *úlfhéðnar,*
> those who in battle
> carry bloodstained shields and stain
> their spears red
> as they advance to fight […]"

Then a third stanza, describing the naval battle of *Hafrsfjǫrðr* (which the king would win), describes them as follows:

> 'The *berserkers* roared [*grenjuðu*], for
> them the battle raged,
> the *úlfhéðnar* howled [*emjuðu*]
> and brandished their weapons."

It is worth noting that the skald refers to them interchangeably *as berserkir* or *úlfhéðnar*, as if even in his time the two were understood not by their attire but by their behaviour, characterised, among other things, by these howls of ferocious beasts. This is the most authentic contemporary account we possess.

In his own account, Snorri emphasises the position accorded to *the berserkir* at the bow of the king's warship, alongside his personal guard: together they formed his elite warriors, who were the object of admiration. And during the battle itself, Snorri highlights the presence of Þórir *haklangr* ('long chin'), who boards the king's ship – *'ok var Þórir berserkr* mikill',

he writes, 'and he was a great berserkr' – and who fought fiercely until his death (also mentioned in another stanza).

Furthermore, in a poem entitled *Háleygjatal* (*Tale* of the Jarls *of the Hlaðir*) composed by Eyvindr *skáldaspillir* in honour of *Jarl* Hákon in the 10th century, he clearly describes an *úlfhéðinn* (without using the word):

> "And this man
> in the storm of *Hár* [= the battle; *Hár* refers to Óðinn] wore the grey
> grey wolf's pelt."

The word *'berserkr'* appears only twice in Eddic poetry: as a mythological reference in the *Hábarðsljóð*, where the god Þórr boasts of having fought 'the women of *the berserkir* [*brúðir berserkja*]' – this is clearly a *kenning* (metaphor) referring to the giantesses –; and a simple allusion in the *Hundluljóð* to the sons of a legendary hero, described as *berserkir*. By contrast, the beast-warriors feature prominently in the Icelandic sagas. In the legendary sagas (*fornaldarsǫgur*), they are most often fabled creatures undergoing genuine metamorphoses. Conversely, however, the sagas of the kings of Norway (*konungasǫgur*), which possess a certain historical realism, preserve the image of groups of *berserkir* recruited by a king or an important chieftain in the pagan era, such as Haki *Haðaberserkr* ('the *berserkr* of Hadeland'), in Snorri's *Hálfdanar saga svarta* (*Saga of Hálfdan the Black*). And several sagas devoted to Saint Óláfr feature one of the evangelising king's fiercest adversaries, a pagan chieftain from Hålogaland, Þórir *hundr* ('the Dog'), who, at the head of his eleven comrades-in-arms, directly confronted King Óláfr Haraldsson and dealt him the fatal blow at the Battle of *Stiklastaðir* (Stiklestad) in 1030. On reading these sagas, including Snorri's, which draw, amongst other sources, on *the Erfidrápa* composed in memory of the king some ten years after his death by the skald Sigvatr Þórðarson, it is clear that these are *berserkir*, even though neither this word nor that of *úlfhéðnar* is ever used.

As for the Icelandic sagas proper (*Íslendingasǫgur*), they depict these savage warriors on the one hand when the action takes place in Norway, and on the other hand in Iceland itself, where the social organisation

(without a monarchy and more egalitarian) and the cultural dominance of the gods Þórr and Freyr (rather than Óðinn) strip the phenomenon of any heroic dimension: on the contrary, the Icelanders feel both mistrust and contempt for these dangerous outcasts of very ill repute, such as Halli and Leiknir in *the Eyrbyggja saga*, Þórir *þǫmb* and Ǫgmundr *illi* in the *Grettis saga*, and many others.

But in these sagas, the presence of a *berserkr* may also be a mere literary device designed to highlight the hero's valour in overcoming the hideous brute, whether through strength or cunning. Thus, in the *Víga-Glúms saga* (*Saga of Glúmr the Murderer*), the young Glúmr confronts and kills a *berserkr*, Bjǫrn *járnhauss* ('Iron Skull'), when he travels to Norway to visit de his grandfather. When the sagas were written in the 13th and 14th centuries, the figure of the beast-like warrior was based on an oral tradition comprising a few skaldic stanzas, numerous accounts of uncertain historicity, and legendary motifs. It is therefore not surprising to find, more or less, the same stereotypes of *the berserksgangr*, who never fails to impress and inspire terror.

During his fit of rage, in addition to the blood-curdling screams he lets out – described in Old Norse using verbs depicting the cries of wild beasts – the *berserkr* goes so far as to bite the edge of his shield, as is recounted, for example, of Ljótr *bleiki* ('the Pale') in *the Egils saga*: *"ok beit í skjǫld* sinn" ("and bit into his shield") and as illustrated by several "pieces" depicting a warrior biting his shield amongst the 93 pieces of the walrus ivory chess set discovered on the Isle of Lewis in the Hebrides, possibly crafted by a Norwegian artisan in the late 12th century.

And throughout his ecstatic trance, the *berserker's* strength is multiplied tenfold. He becomes invulnerable to the edge of weapons, *'við at þá bita engi* járn' ('for iron does not bite into them'), as numerous sagas emphasise, and even impervious to fire – which could be explained by a form of anaesthesia affecting the entire body of the warrior in the throes of ecstasy. But when this state ends, he sinks into apathy and exhaustion – a situation from which the opponent sometimes takes advantage: it is at this moment, for example, that Víga-Styrr overcomes the two *berserkers* Halli and Leiknir and composes a stanza which he concludes with these lines:

'Behold, with my sword I have secured

a resting place for *the berserkir*."

If this stanza, in which the word *berserkir* appears, as quoted in *the Eyrbyggja saga*, is authentic (though this is not certain), it too would date from the pagan era.

A wide variety of theories have been put forward regarding the nature of *berserksgangr*, ranging from neurological or mental disorders to shamanism. In the late 18th century, the Swede Samuel Ödmann suggested that, in order to be seized by their characteristic frenzy, the berserk warriors ingested fly agaric, which contains hallucinogenic substances. This theory remained popular for a long time, to the extent that in Iceland, in 1913, a botanist gave *Amanita muscaria* the Icelandic name *berserkjasveppur* (literally, *'berserkir's* mushroom'). But Norse sources make no mention of the consumption of narcotics or of techniques specific to shamanism: the fury of *the berserkir* arises suddenly, without any prior preparation. In *the Ynglinga saga*, Snorri presents Óðinn as their god: they are 'his men [*hans menn*]', his warriors, who are seized by *berserksgangr*, a term whose connection to the Odinic myth is clear. Etymologically, the name Óðinn is indeed derived from the Norse adjective *óðr* ('furious') – itself derived from the Common Germanic **wōða*, from which the modern German word *Wut* ('rage') is derived, as well as the
Germanic variants of the theonym Wotan. When Adam of Bremen, in his **Gesta Hammaburgensis**, mentions the three idols of the temple *of Ubsola* (*Uppsalir*), he describes Óðinn as follows:

"The second, Wodan, that is to say, fury [*Wodan, id est furor*], directs wars and inspires man with the courage to face his enemies."

For the 'fury' that characterises him is to be understood in all its forms of excitement, including ecstasy and trances, and, among other things, 'warrior's fury'.

On the inner surface of a shield boss dating from the 3rd century, excavated from the Torsbjerg bog (in Schleswig), a brief inscription is engraved: <**aisgRh**>. The word <**aisgR**> may mean 'one who is in the grip of a furious delirium', whilst the rune <**h**> (**haglaz*, in Common Germanic [*hagl*, in Old Norse]) must have its ideographic value of 'hail', or even 'violent death'. Here is a shield that, in this very distant period, foreshadows the phenomenon of the 'wild warriors' which emerged several centuries later in Scandinavia, in the entourage of kings or chieftains

important figures, of whom they willingly became the warrior elite and with whom they shared the cult of Óðinn. This is illustrated, for example, on one of the decorative bands of the largest of the Gallehus horns, by two naked warriors with wolf heads – they are probably wearing masks – one brandishing a sword, the other an axe; and on one of the four small bronze plaques found at Torslunda, on the island of Öland, a figure clad entirely in a wolfskin drawing his sword from its sheath and pointing his spear downwards, and another, one-eyed, wearing a helmet with horns shaped like bird heads that meet, a spear in each hand: respectively a beast-warrior and, in all likelihood, the incarnation of Óðinn.

The *berserksgangr* is attested to have existed during the Viking Age.

22
Was Óðinn the Vikings' favourite god?

> "Hrafnkell loved no god more than Freyr and offered him half of his finest possessions."
>
> *Hrafnkels saga*, c. 1300

We have a fairly good understanding of the Vikings' view of the universe. We know how they conceived of the creation and the end of the world, and how they imagined their gods, the Æsir, working to maintain a fragile balance against monsters and giants. For there is no shortage of information on the myths, although our sources are neither complete nor entirely reliable, since most date from several centuries after the conversion to Christianity. However, many poems originate from the pagan era, and the beliefs have a long history dating back at least to the Bronze Age and evolving over the centuries.

An individual may personally invoke the god they worship, expecting specific help from him if needed, in exchange for offerings or sacrifices. But rituals also take place within the private sphere of the household, presided over by the head of the family. And public sacrifices regularly occur during major social and seasonal gatherings, such as the holding of a *þing*.

Many natural sites can be used for worship: a field (*akr*), a meadow (*vin*), an enclosure (*vangr, tún*), a grove (*lundr*), a wood (*viðr*), a rock (*berg*) – associated with the earth; a stream (*bekkr*), a river (*á*), a waterfall (*fors*), an island (*ey*), a lake (*sær*) – associated with water. The oldest term for a sanctuary is *vé*, a sacred space; but *hǫrgr* originally referred to a kind of mound or stone altar, and later to a small building intended for worship, which illustrates the evolution towards the use of the 'temple' or *hof*.

All these names are found in Scandinavian place-names; when combined with the name of a god or goddess, they bear witness to their worship in a particular place – which allows us to appreciate their importance and extent. For example, the name of the city of Odense in Denmark, originally *Óðinsvé*, means 'the sanctuary of Óðinn'; that of the Icelandic river Þórsá, which has remained unchanged since the Viking Age, means 'the river of Þórr'; that of the Swedish farm Fröstuna [**Freystún*] means 'Freyr's enclosure'; and in Norway, that of the Ullerøy peninsula [**Ullarey*], formerly an island, means 'Ullr's island'. The same deities are worshipped throughout almost all of Scandinavia, though to varying degrees, with local or personal differences.

Óðinn is frequently invoked by the skalds in their poems, for he stole the nectar of poetry from the giants and gave it to the Aesir and the skalds. It is he who, together with his two brothers, is the origin of the world and who created the first human couple, Askr and Embla. But Óðinn, who possesses wisdom, knows all destinies and communicates with the dead, is unpredictable. His power, linked to magic, incantations and runes, is cause for concern.

In Iceland, there are no place names derived from the name Óðinn, and very few are found in the rest of Scandinavia. This disparity between Óðinn's presence in myths and his limited representation in place names is corroborated by personal names: there is at most one Odinkar (**Óðinkárr*) in Denmark, and one Óðindís in Sweden, as his name is not readily adopted in the same way as that of Þórr.

Óðinn is the god of the elite: only a small number worship him. A legend, preserved in the *Flateyjarbók*, tells that King Haraldr *hárfagri*, in his childhood, was a guest of Óðinn. As for his son, Eiríkr

blóðøx, Óðinn himself receives him in *Valhǫll* upon his death, says the anonymous skald in the *Eiríksmál*, a poem he composed in his memory.

Nevertheless, the expression *Þórr ok Óðinn* ('Þórr and *Óðinn'*), used very frequently in Norse sources, attests to the customary association of these two gods when they are invoked.

Unlike Óðinn, Þórr is the very embodiment of the valiant and uncompromising warrior. A tall, red-haired man of colossal strength, he is constantly battling the giants. It is therefore he who, most conspicuously, protects the gods and men from chaos. In his chariot drawn by two goats, his fearsome hammer (*Mjǫllnir*) in hand, he is also master of thunder and lightning, and thus of rain and fair weather – though his role as a god of fertility is merely secondary. Impulsive, courageous and a bon vivant, he embodies the ideal of the Vikings, to whom he is very closely associated.

His cult, already well established in western Norway at the time of the colonisation of Iceland, continued to spread, reaching Sweden and Denmark during the final century of paganism. The name Þórr appears in a great many place names, which obviously contrasts with Óðinn's supremacy as portrayed in the texts. He was 'the most honoured of all the gods [*mest tignaðr af ǫllum guðum*]', as we read in *the Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*.

Personal names amply confirm his popularity: in Iceland, for example, a quarter of the men's and women's names mentioned in the *Landnámabók* – in other words, nearly a thousand! – are derived from the name Þórr, such as Þóra, Þórarinn, Þorbjǫrn, Þórdís, Þórðr, Þorfinnr, Þórir, Þorkell, Þorleifr, Þormóðr, Þorsteinn, Þorvaldr, etc., which are among the most common. The cult of Þórr was deeply rooted in the families of Iceland's settlers, many of whom, according to the *Landnámabók*, turned to him for guidance on where to settle on the island. *The Eyrbyggja saga* gives two examples of parents dedicating their sons to Þórr, and Haukr's version of the *Landnámabók* explains that this practice is intended to bring good fortune and long life to the child, who, instead of being called Oddr or Grímr, is given the name Þóroddr or Þorgrímr. Þórr is, in a sense, the patron of Iceland's colonisation and, as long as the island remains pagan, he remains the most revered of the gods.

His myths are known and cherished throughout Scandinavia, and the common people of the Vikings readily place their trust in him. In a poem

In the *Hárbarðsljóð*, Hárbarðr (who is in fact Óðinn in disguise) says contemptuously that 'the *jarls* who fall in battle' go to Óðinn, whilst Þórr must be content with 'the race of slaves'. This is a deliberate exaggeration on Hárbarðr's part, but it nevertheless suggests that the two gods were associated with rather different social classes.

Freyr and Freyja, for their part, along with their father Njǫrðr, represent the other divine family, the Vanir, and are associated with peace and fertility. Njǫrðr is the god of fishing and navigation. Freyr has power over the rain and the sun's radiance, and vegetation and harvests depend on him. But he is also the god of fertility linked to sex, an aspect he shares with his sister, who embodies the feminine element. Freyja is beautiful and lascivious: she brings happiness in love, she represents sensuality and pleasure, and she plays a protective role in pregnancies and childbirth. The three Vanir alone account for as many place names as all the other gods combined. While names containing Njǫrðr are common in Norway, they are even more so in Sweden, particularly in the east of the country, but they are rare in Iceland and Denmark. It is also worth noting that natural features are the most common second element in these names. The cult of Freyr has left some traces in Iceland and Denmark, but far more so in Norway and Sweden. The same applies to the cult of Freyja.

After Þórr, the Vanir are therefore the most popular deities and, as a result, the most widely worshipped. However, their names do not appear as frequently as his in personal names: there are only a few instances of Freygerðr, Freyleif, Freysteinn and Freyviðr in Iceland, as well as names beginning with Ing- and Yngv-, which should be associated with Yngvi (= Freyr), such as Ingimundr, Ingjaldr and Ingólfr.

The texts confirm the toponymic data. There are a few examples of sacrifices to Freyr in Iceland and especially in Sweden, under the name of Yngvi, whom the *Svíar* regard as the ancestor of the royal *Ynglingar* dynasty. Similarly, Saxo mentions the sacrifices made by *Hadingus* to the god *Frö* (Freyr): this, he writes in his *Gesta Danorum*, is what the Swedes call the 'Fröblot' (*Freysblót*, 'sacrifice to Freyr'). Freyr shares his popularity with Njǫrðr and Freyja, although, of the three, he is undoubtedly the foremost. Written sources illustrating the spread of the cult of his father and sister are rarer. In the

Gylfaginning (*Gylfi's Deception*), the first part of Snorri's Prose *Edda*, we read that it is good to invoke the goddess to find happiness in love. And in the *Hákonar saga góða* (*Saga of Hákon the Good*), Snorri also states that sacrifices are made to Njǫrðr 'for the harvest and peace [*til árs ok friðar*]' alongside those to Freyr and Óðinn.

Baldr, about whom the sources tell us very little, is innocence personified: handsome, wise, eloquent – and his cult is scarcely attested. Only the *Friðþjófs saga frækna* (*Saga of Friðþjófr the Bold*) mentions a temple dedicated to him in Sogn, Norway; but this is a late saga (14th century) and this sanctuary is highly likely to be fictional. However, his name does appear in a few place names, though very rarely.

Frigg, Óðinn's wife, is the grieving mother following the death of her son, Baldr. But it would be unfair to reduce her to this role alone, even though, in the Viking Age, Freyja pushed her into the shadows by taking over most of her 'Venusian' duties. Frigg, protector of lovers, was also the goddess of fertility – whom we still invoke alongside Freyja to aid a woman in labour. Snorri rightly states, in the *Gylfaginning*, that Frigg is the most eminent of the goddesses and that, alongside her, Freyja is 'the most honoured [*tignust*]'. Yet she appears in only two place names, one in Norway, the other in Sweden: we know nothing of her cult, which is surprisingly under-represented in place-name usage.

Certain supernatural creatures are conceived of solely in collective terms, such as the elves (*álfar*, rather mysterious beings) and the dises (*dísir*, female deities who are sometimes helpful, sometimes hostile).

The cult of the elves is now largely remembered only through 'elf stones' (known as *álfasteinar* in Iceland or *älvstenar* in Sweden); however, these names are well attested in place-names, except in Denmark. Several personal names are formed with *the suffix -álfr*, both masculine names such as Þórálfr or Álfgeirr, and feminine names such as Álfgerðr, Álfheið or Álfhildr. And the vitality of the cult of the dises is evident in the many women's names where *-dís* is the second element: Ásdís, Herdís, Vigdís, Hjǫrdís, Jódís, Þórdís, Valdís, Védís, etc.

A sacrifice to the elves (*álfablót*), which brings together family and friends in the autumn, takes place in Sweden, as described by Sigvatr Þórðarson in the early 11th century in his *Austrfararvísur* (*Verses of the Journey to the East*). And a similar sacrifice, but to the dises (*dísablót*), is mentioned, also in

in connection with the end of the harvest in Norway, in the *Víga-Glúms saga* and *the Egils saga* – but there is no mention of this in Iceland.

Finally, let us mention two gods who occupy a very modest place in the myths, but who must have been widely honoured before the Viking Age, during which their cult declined significantly: Týr and Ullr.

Týr, too, saves the world from chaos by agreeing to sacrifice his hand to the wolf Fenrir. His name – *týr* means 'god' – suggests that he was once among the foremost of the deities, as evidenced by a 5th-century bracteate from Trollhättan, Sweden, on which the myth is depicted. And although this is the only myth we know of concerning him, there is scarcely any other god (apart from Þórr) whose name appears so frequently in Danish place-names. As he is scarcely represented elsewhere, it was therefore essentially in Denmark that he was most widely worshipped.

As for Ullr, only scattered fragments of information about him hint at his former greatness. We are left with the image of him as a hunter with a bow, so skilful and such a gifted skier that no one could match him. He was handsome and possessed all the qualities of a warrior, so it was wise to invoke him in duels, asserts Snorri in the *Gylfaginning*. Yet Ullr has as many, if not more, place names than Þórr, a sign that he was the object of great devotion. In Sweden, they are particularly numerous in Uppland, and in Norway, especially around the Oslo Fjord. In Denmark, however, there are none.

The religious practices of the Vikings, fully integrated into their society, were based on myths that answered the questions they asked about their environment. The gods played a decisive role in the well-being of men, who felt both united with them and dependent on their favours. Sacrifices and magic served as a means of keeping the threatening universe at bay; hence the devotion to natural forces, solidarity with ancestors, and sacrifices to the god(s) that each individual was free to choose.

23
Is Valhalla the Vikings' paradise?

'The fifth is called Glaðheimr; there,
shining like gold,
lies the spacious Valhǫll;
there, Hroptr [the Shouter (= Óðinn)]
chooses each day
'the warriors who fell in battle.'

Grímnismál, 10th century

The German term *Walhalla*, in use across the Rhine from the mid-18th century and borrowed into French either as it stands or spelled 'Valhalla', is still commonly used today to refer to the 'Viking paradise'. But what is it really? This is not the meaning of the original Old Norse word, *Valhǫll*, which breaks down into *valr* ('the slain', in the collective sense) and *hǫll* ('hall', 'hall') and literally means: 'the hall of the slain' – in other words, the name given to Óðinn's vast hall.

This concept is attested in Norse sources from the very beginning of the Viking Age, thanks to the skalds. To refer to shields, the following metaphor (*kenning*) is found in a stanza of *the Hrafnsmál* (9th century): 'The birch bark of Sváfnir's hall [*Sváfnis salnæfrar*]. ' Now, Sváfnir is one of the many names given to Óðinn. In the

10th century, the *Eiríksmál* and the *Hákonarmál* are two poems that recount, respectively, the arrival of Kings Eiríkr *blóðøx* and Hákon *góði* at *Valhǫll*, led by Valkyries. The former depicts Eiríkr drinking beer with the Aesir in 'the abode of the gods [*sjǫt guða*]', a motif found in the latter, where the place is described as 'the verdant realm of the gods [*grœnna heima guða*]'. This same motif recurs, for example, in the 12th century, in a stanza of *the Krákumál*, where Ragnarr *loðbrók* in the serpent pit is said to exclaim:

> 'They call to me, the dises [= the Valkyries]
> whom Óðinn has sent
> from the hall of Herjan [the leader of the army (= Óðinn)].
> Joyful, I go to the high seat to drink
> mead with the Aesir."

But it is an Eddic poem, the *Grímnismál* (*The Sayings of Grímnir*), which is thought to have been composed in the pagan era, that offers the earliest description of *Valhalla*. Grímnir ('the Masked One') is none other than Óðinn, and it is he who speaks in the poem.

In the early 13th century, Snorri Sturluson, in his *Gylfaginning*, drew heavily on this poem—quoting several stanzas and paraphrasing them—to describe *Valhalla* in Ásgarðr. It is so high, he writes, that one can 'barely make out its summit', and so vast that it has no fewer than six hundred and forty doors, through which eight hundred warriors can pass at the same time. The *Grímnismál* explains in these terms that:

> 'The framework is made of spears,
> the hall is covered with shields,
> and the benches are strewn with chainmail."

Such is *Valhǫll*, 'shining like gold [*gull-bjarta*]'.

Perched on its roof, the goat Heiðrún grazes on the young shoots of the branches of the tree Læraðr (this is Yggdrasill, the cosmic tree) and mead flows from her udders in such abundance that she fills an entire vat every day. Likewise, the stag Eikþyrnir grazes on the tree's branches, and water trickles from his antlers into the spring known as Hvergelmir.

It is in this enormous hall that Óðinn welcomes the valiantest warriors fallen in battle, the *einherjar* (literally: 'those who fight one-on-one' or 'in a single army'). They will take part and perish, alongside the gods, in the final battle at Ragnarǫk. Every day, they take up arms and set out to fight one another. Then, writes Snorri, 'when lunchtime approaches, they return on horseback to *Valhǫll* and sit down to feast'; and he quotes this stanza from *the Vafþrúðnismál* (*The Sayings of Vafþrúðnir*):

> 'All the *Einherjar* in
> Óðinn's hall
> do battle every day; they count
> the dead
> then return on horseback from the battle
> and then sit together, reconciled."

For their daily feast, the *Einherjar*, despite their numbers, never lack for food or drink. They drink the mead of the goat Heiðrún; and the cook, Andhrímnir, boils the flesh of the boar Sæhrímnir in his cauldron, which regenerates itself every day. Óðinn, for his part, does not eat any of it: he consumes only wine and gives the food served to him to his two wolves, Geri ('Glutton') and Freki ('Voracious'). As for the notion of ceaselessly recurring combat, with the wounded regaining their full strength and the 'dead' returning to life, this is also found in the legendary Battle of *the Hjaðningar* – an eternal battle described in the 9th century by the skald Bragi in the *Ragnarsdrápa*.

The image of *Valhǫll* and its *einherjar* is also inseparable from that of the Valkyries who, as their name suggests (*valkyrjur*), are tasked with selecting the slain (*kjósa val*) on the battlefield. The *Hávamál* even advises warriors not to look up at the sky during battle, so as not to attract their attention. Once their task is complete, the Valkyries – sometimes referred to as *Óðins meyjar* ('the daughters of Óðinn') – are seen serving drink to all these warriors in *Valhǫll*.

An stanza from the *Grímnismál*, referring to *Fólkvangr* (literally 'Plain of the Hosts'), the home of Freyja, also suggests that Óðinn and she share them between them:

‘Half of the dead
she chooses each day,
and half belongs to Óðinn.”

And Snorri specifies that Freyja, whose hall called *Sessrúmnir* (‘which contains many seats’) is vast and beautiful, also roams the battlefields for this purpose.

The members of this warrior elite are welcomed to Ásgarðr in the same way they were in life in the hall of a king or an important chieftain. But what becomes of the others?

Those who perish at sea fall under the power of Rán. Wife of the sea giant Ægir and mother of the waves, her name literally means ‘abduction’ and no doubt refers to the terror the sea can inspire. The skalds referred to her frequently in *kenningar*, and Egill Skallagrímsson laments in his poem entitled *Sonatorrek* that Rán has taken one of his sons from him. For Rán has a net which she uses to catch men who fall into the sea and drag them to the bottom, explains Snorri in the second part of his Prose *Edda*: the *Skáldskaparmál* (*Poetic Art*) – hence the image of her reigning over sailors lost at sea. And *the Eyrbyggja saga* indicates that if they ‘return’ to attend their own funeral feast, it is because they have been well received by her. In contrast, Rán appears only very rarely in Eddic poetry.

For all those, men and women alike, who do not die with weapons in their hands or at sea, there is Hel, the realm of the dead – a name that undoubtedly conveys the idea of ‘hiding’. It is a vast underground domain, enclosed by a high gate known as *Helgrindr*, ‘Hel’s Gate’ (but also *Nágrindr*, ‘gate of the corpses’, or *Valgrindr*, ‘gate of the slain’). *Gjallarbrú* is the bridge that allows the dead to cross the Gjǫll, the river mentioned in the *Grímnismál* as one of those that ‘flow amongst men and from there to Hel [*til Heljar héðan*]’. This bridge is mentioned, among other places, in the *Gylfaginning*, which also states that the path leading to Hel (*Helvegr*) goes ‘downwards and northwards [*niðr ok norðr*]’. And Snorri, in the 13th century, gives a particularly grim and detailed description of the realm of the dead, which probably does not correspond to how the pagan Vikings imagined it.

A goddess reigns there. She bears its name and is probably a poetic personification of it, as suggested by *kenningar* dating back to the 10th century: *rann Heljar*, 'the abode of Hel', or *salar Heljar*, 'the halls of Hel', refer to the realm of the dead. Hel, as described by Snorri, is a hideous creature, her skin a mixture of blue-black and flesh-coloured, daughter of Loki and the giantess Angrboða, and sister of the wolf Fenrir and Jǫrmungandr (the serpent of Miðgarðr): Óðinn cast her into the underworld of Niflheimr, where she is to receive
'those who die of sickness and those who die of old age'. However, in a stanza of the Eddic poem *Vafþrúðnismál*, reference is made to all the dead, without distinction:

> 'Down below, in Niflhel,
> that is where men die."

Even today, in modern Icelandic, the expression *'fara til heljar'* is commonly used to mean 'to die'.

Finally, many *of the Íslendingasǫgur* mention other beliefs, according to which the deceased continues to live in the mound beneath which he was buried. From his grave, near his farm, the departed ancestor watches over his kin. In the *Njáls saga*, for example, Gunnar of Hlíðarendi, Njáll's noble and courageous friend, is buried beneath a mound. Yet it sometimes happens that he is heard joyfully reciting a verse, implicitly advising his listeners to follow his example: to die rather than yield to the enemy. But some of the dead do not rest in peace in their graves – generally people who were very wicked in life or dissatisfied with their own fate or that of their descendants – and return to torment their loved ones. These malevolent revenants are known as *draugar*. Thus, the *Eyrbyggja saga* cites the case of Þórólfr *bægifótr* ('the lame one') and others who torment the people of the Fróðá farm. Similarly, the *Laxdæla saga* recounts that after his death, Hrappr began to return frequently, and that his body, which had not decomposed, had to be exhumed, burned on a pyre, and its ashes thrown into the sea to put an end to his misdeeds. And the *Grettis saga* depicts Grettir fighting and successively beheading the *draugr* of Kárr *gamli* and that of Glámr.

Archaeology confirms what Snorri writes in the prologue to the *Heimskringla*: the 'age of burial mounds' (*haugsǫld*) succeeded – in Denmark first of all – the age of cremation (*brúnaǫld*). Cremation persisted for longer in Norway and, above all, in Sweden, and was almost never practised in Iceland. The humblest were buried simply: a pile of stones marked their graves, or sometimes a large stone without an inscription (known as *a bautastein*). Many graves are surrounded by stones arranged in the shape of a ship, and for people of higher rank, burial beneath a mound is the norm, often in a boat which is then covered by the tumulus.

Archaeology also confirms the beliefs of the Viking Age. On the one hand, there was a belief in life after death. Many were buried with items they would need in the afterlife. The grave goods found in pagan burials vary considerably depending on the social status of the deceased: from a simple knife in some cases, to a whole array of weapons, tools, kitchen utensils, foodstuffs and precious objects, or even domestic animals such as a horse or a dog. And secondly, the belief in a sea voyage to the afterlife, as reflected in these numerous boat burials or ship-shaped graves. They take us back to the myth of Baldr's funeral, described by Snorri based on a poem composed towards the end of the 10th century by the Icelandic skald Úlfr Uggason, and from which we retain the image of the funeral ship in flames being pushed out to sea, on board which burn the body of Baldr, murdered at Loki's instigation, and that of his wife, Nanna, who died of grief.

The Vikings probably imagined that those who distinguished themselves through their valour within their society would also distinguish themselves in the afterlife. It is not surprising that it is the most valiant warriors who occupy a place of honour in the myth of *Valhalla*.

But 'Valhalla' can hardly be described as a 'Viking paradise': it is, at best, the dream of the royal or princely elite troops, foremost among whom are the 'beast-warriors', who, once they have become *einherjar*, intend to maintain their steadfast loyalty to Óðinn. What is more, whilst it is the warrior's bravery or ferocity that grants entry to *Valhǫll*, access to (Christian) paradise is obviously contingent upon a blameless life.

24
Is magic a ‘science’ for the Vikings?

> ‘Many foolish people believe only what they see with their own eyes or hear with their own ears, and never what seems far removed from their nature, such as […] the way in which trickery or sorcery and powerful magic [*fjǫlkyngi*] bring some a life of misfortune or death, but others honour, wealth and reputation. Sometimes magicians unleash the elements, sometimes they appease them, just like Óðinn and those who have learnt from him the practice of magic [*galdr*] or medicine.”
>
> *Gǫngu-Hrólfs saga*, 14th century

The Old Norse language boasts a rich vocabulary relating to the field of magic, its forms, its functions and its practice. The adjective *fjǫlkunnigr*, which literally means ‘of manifold knowledge’, implies that this knowledge is supernatural and is used to describe anyone versed in magic (*fjǫlkyngi*) – magic in the broadest sense of the term, as its practitioners use it indiscriminately for good or evil: they are capable of entering

into contact with the other world – that of their beliefs – which interferes with the real world, and to compel its forces to bend to their will.

Our knowledge of Norse magic comes primarily from Norse sources. Among the oldest are a few skaldic praise poems that refer to it, but above all the Eddic poems, such as the *Hávamál* or the *Vǫluspá*, as the supernatural beings – the gods, giants, dwarves, elves, etc. – are all described as possessing magical powers. However, it is the sagas that provide us with the most insight. Magic features in the sagas of the kings of Norway, notably those of Haraldr *hárfagri*, Hákon *góði* and Óláfr Tryggvason: Snorri Sturluson endeavours to reconstruct past beliefs within them. And it permeates the *Íslendingasǫgur* in particular, whose Christian authors, even in the 13th century, retained a certain notion of it inherited from the tales and mindset of their ancestors – unless they partly reinvented it, which is very difficult to determine. Virtually all the sagas in this category mention or depict magical practices, many of which play an important role in the narrative, sometimes a crucial one, as is the case in the *Grettis saga*. On the other hand, of course, the *fornaldarsǫgur*, which are essentially legendary and fantastical sagas, draw on every possible aspect of the magic of ancient times, without going into detail.

It is hardly surprising that, following the Christianisation of the region, both Icelandic (*Grágás*) and Norwegian – such as the *Gulaþinglǫg* or King Sverrir's *Christian Law* (*Sverris Kristenrétt*) – imposed particularly severe penalties for witchcraft.

Seiðr is the principal form of magic. Snorri explains in *the Ynglinga saga* that it was the goddess Freyja who taught *seiðr* to the Æsir, an art commonly practised by the Vanir (deities of fertility and sexual potency) and which Óðinn himself practised:

> 'Through this he had the power to know the fate of men and events to come, as well as to inflict death, misfortune or illness upon men, and to deprive some of their sanity or strength and bestow them upon others. But the practice of this magic is accompanied by such great effeminacy [*ergi*] that men felt they could not engage in it without shame."

Indeed, whilst Óðinn has no qualms about stooping to such practices, *seiðr*—into which humans are initiated—is primarily the domain of women (*seiðkonur*). Men who practise it (*seiðmenn*) knowingly run the risk of social ostracism and expose themselves to strong suspicions of homosexuality (which the Vikings do not tolerate). *Seiðr* is a sophisticated magical practice, a set of specific techniques used by sorceresses or seers whom people may call upon. The importance of *seiðr* is such that the term eventually came to refer to all forms of magic, whatever they might be.

But *seiðr* and its sexual connotations are not the only form of magic.

Let's return to Óðinn. He possesses many other powers, not all of which are accessible to humans. Snorri gives a glimpse of these in *the Ynglinga saga*: in addition to the ability to shapeshift, extinguish fire, direct the course of the winds, seek the counsel of the dead, or even learn news from across the world through his two ravens, he mentions 'the songs called *galdrar*'. These are magical incantations which the sagas describe as melodious, pleasant to the ear, sustained by a particular Eddic metre (*galdralag*), rhythmic and presumably sung in a high-pitched voice. *Galdr*, which can be practised by both women and men, harnesses the destructive power of speech, often with the aim of casting spells. But it is also used in other magical contexts – within the framework of *seiðr,* for example.

Another example is *útiseta*, a practice involving sitting outdoors (*sitja úti*), at night, on a burial mound for instance or near a stream, to make contact with spirits or supernatural beings: *at vekja trǫll upp* ('to awaken the trolls'), in order to obtain hidden knowledge, much like certain practices of Óðinn.

Fortune-telling plays a significant role. The female practitioner is known as *a vǫlva* (seer; plural: *vǫlur*) or *a spákona* (diviner); for a man, the term is *spámaðr* (diviner).

The Eiríks saga rauða paints a detailed portrait of a *vǫlva* performing a *seiðr*, Þorbjǫrg *litilvǫlva* ('the little seer'). The scene is set at Þorkell's farm in Greenland, during a time of severe famine, and he consults Þorbjǫrg on the matter. Seated on a kind of platform (*seiðhjallr)*, she wears a dark blue cloak, a pearl necklace, a black lambskin cap lined with white cat fur, and a flint belt to which is

She wears a large leather pouch containing her magical objects (*taufr*), shoes made of long-haired calfskin, and gloves made of catskin. She holds a staff (*stafr*) topped with a bronze-ringed pommel adorned with stones. Surrounded by a circle of women and supported by magical incantations chanted by one of them, she performs the ritual that enables her to predict the end of the famine.

The *Færeyinga saga* describes the impressive spectacle staged by Þrándr of Gata in the Faroe Islands for the magical ritual he performed to bring back three men—Einarr, Þórir and Sigmundr—for a few moments, in order to prove how they had died; their apparitions were all the more macabre because the latter was holding his own head in his hands.

In a legendary saga that was very popular in the 13th century, the *Hrólfs saga kraka* (*Saga of Hrólfr the Cripple*), the Danish king Fróði calls upon a seeress named Heiðr to reveal to him the hiding place of his two young nephews. The episode also features in Saxo's *Gesta Danorum*, which states that the two boys felt themselves 'torn from their shelter by the extraordinary power of a sorceress's spells, whose gaze drew them in irresistibly'.

There is no shortage of examples of divinatory magic. For instance, in the *Ljósvetninga saga* (*Saga of the People of Ljósavatn*), the sorceress Þórhildr *váðlækkja* foretells the future to Guðmundr. Wearing chainmail and a helmet, she strikes the water of a river with an axe: nothing happens, so Guðmundr's life is not in danger. But he asks her to do the same for his sons: a loud noise then resounds and all the water turns red with blood, which she interprets as an ominous sign for one of them.

The manipulation of natural phenomena is another important aspect of magic. In the *Gísla saga*, the sorceress Auðbjǫrg decides to avenge her son, who has been wounded in the head by Bergr. In the middle of the cold, clear night, she walks several times around her house in the opposite direction to the sun's course (*andsœlis*), sniffing in all directions: in this way, she causes a great snowstorm and triggers a deadly avalanche on Bergr's farm.

This kind of *gørningaveðr* ('bad weather caused by sorcery') is common. In *the Eyrbyggja saga*, Þorgríma *galdrakinn* also, at Þóroddr's request, raises a snowstorm that leads Bjǫrn astray on the highlands of Snæfellsnes. In the *Njáls saga*, the sorcerer Svanr Bjarnarson,

wrapping a goatskin around his head, he casts spells and conjures up a thick fog and sudden darkness, preventing the attackers from reaching his farm. And in the *Laxdæla saga*, it is an entire family practising *seiðr* – Kotkell, his wife Gríma and their two sons – who, reciting powerful incantations from a *seiðhjallr*, raise a violent storm at sea to deliberately cause a ship to be wrecked.

Conversely, in the *Vatnsdæla saga*, the sorcerer Bárðr *stirfinn*, standing within a circle and waving a cloth, brings a storm to an end. And other practices are not necessarily directed towards harmful ends. In the *Landnámabók*, Hildigunnr Beinisdóttir draws a whale onto her own shore. Originally from Hålogaland, Þuríðr *sundafyllir* owes her nickname ('she who fills the straits') to the fact that, by practising *seiðr*, she drew large quantities of fish there to end a famine: and according to the *Landnámabók*, she also established a fishing ground in Ísafjǫrðr, Iceland.

Magic can be used just as easily to cure an illness or injury as to cause serious physical or mental harm. Healers or doctors (*læknar*) rarely resort to magic, but magicians do sometimes use their talents for therapeutic purposes. In the *Kormáks saga*, the seer Þórdís *spákona* heals Þorvarðr of his wounds, and in the *Kjalnesinga saga* (*Saga of the People of Kjalarnes*) the magician Korpúlfr takes excellent care of his nephew.

Yet whilst her presence may be beneficial, a sorceress does not hesitate to cast spells on those she dislikes, making them ill, driving them mad, or even causing their death. This is what happens in *the *Grettis saga**: the sorceress Þuríðr *fóstra* casts this curse on the outlawed Grettir: 'May you be deprived of all health, luck and happiness, and of all defence and wisdom!', which affects him greatly. Subsequently, she bewitches a tree stump by carving evil runes into it, which she colours with her blood whilst reciting incantations, then throws it into the sea. The stump drifts to the island of Drangey, where Grettir has taken refuge: he injures his thigh whilst trying to chop it up. Soon the wound becomes infected, his leg turns black and, weakened by gangrene, he perishes at the hands of those who come to attack him on the island.

It is also magic that dooms the skald Kormákr to an impossible relationship with Steingerðr, the love of his life: the sorceress 'Þórveig practised *seiðr* so that they might never enjoy each other's company'. And in the

Vatnsdæla saga, the sorceress Gróa seduces Þorsteinn, who is married but falls in love with her 'because of her magic [*fyrir sakar fjǫlkyngi hennar*]'.

And the magic of a warrior's nature is no small matter: it can endow a fighter with strength and courage or, conversely, with fear and weakness; it can influence the outcome of a battle or a duel. Thus, according to the *Landnámabók*, the sorceress Ljót weaves a protective tunic for her son; according to the *Heiðarvíga saga* (*Saga of the Battle on the Heath*), and that Þórveig *fóstra* gives Bersi a shield that wards off all blows.

The *Laxdæla saga* mentions, in a Christianised Iceland, the discovery (under the floor of a church) of 'black and sinister' bones, a brooch (*kinga*) and a large sorceress's staff (*seiðstafr mikill)*: "It was then considered that there had been the grave of a seer [*vǫluleiði*] there."

Not only was magic a reality for the Vikings, who accorded it a significant place, but it was also linked to the very structure of their society and their conception of the universe.

Ásdís, Grettir's mother, gave this advice to her two sons:

> 'I have had strange dreams. Beware of witchcraft! There is little more powerful than magic.'

25
Are runes magical symbols?

"I know that I was hung
from the wind-swept tree
for nine whole
nights, wounded by
the spear and
offered to Óðinn,
myself to myself; hung on
that tree
whose roots
where its roots lie.

I was given neither bread
nor a horn to drink from;
I looked beneath, I
gathered the runes,
screaming, I gathered
them, and from there, I
fell."

Rúnatal (*Hávamál*, before 960)

Runic writing, which is probably based on a mixture of the North Etruscan and Latin alphabets, and whose angular form is well suited to engraving on hard surfaces, was developed and then disseminated

as far as Northern Europe by the ancient Germanic peoples around 200 AD. It is therefore an alphabetic script (each rune corresponds to a phoneme) which allows the sequence of sounds it represents to be reproduced more or less faithfully. The Germanic *fuþark* – a sequence of twenty-four runes, so named after the first six – attested around 400 AD on the Kylver Stone (Gotland), is used to transcribe not only the Common North Germanic language but also other Germanic languages such as Gothic, Burgundian and Lombard. With a few rare exceptions, these texts are engraved on objects and are generally very short. Furthermore, each rune has a name, the initial sound of which indicates its phonetic value: this is the principle of acrophony.

In the 8th century, runic writing entered a period of decline: phonetic shifts in the Germanic languages rendered the *fuþark* unsuitable, leading to the definitive disappearance of the continental runic tradition, which appears to have been practised by a minority for private use. It continued, however, in England, where an Anglo-Saxon *fuþorc* developed, enriched with new signs, whilst in Scandinavia linguistic evolution stabilised by the end of the century: the Old Norse language was born… A new *fuþark* then emerged, attested as early as the beginning of the 9th century on the Gørlev Stone (Denmark), perhaps created by one or more individuals determined to use the runes as a genuine means of communication. This Scandinavian *fuþark* now comprises only 16 symbols, all derived from *the* ancient *fuþark* – an exceptional reduction in the history of writing systems – whilst retaining both acrophony and a reasonably high degree of legibility.

ᚠᚢᚦᚬᚱᚴ ᚼᚾᛁᛅᛋ ᛏᛒᛘᛚᚱ

fuþąrk hnias tbmlR

This became the writing of the Vikings: the texts, longer than before, carved primarily into stone (smooth walls, boulders, standing stones and carved stones), took on a public dimension.

After that, towards the end of the Middle Ages (from the mid-11th to the 14th century), as the Latin alphabet had firmly established itself in Scandinavia, the medieval *fuþark*, with its twenty-two or twenty-three symbols, adapted as best it could; and the runes were no longer the preserve of a

certain elite, but a more popular form of writing used in everyday life, on a wide variety of media.

It is clear that runes fulfil the same functions as any other alphabetic script. On the other hand, there is no denying that they are closely linked to religious and magical practices.

Eddic poetry echoes this. The *Hávamál* recounts how Óðinn became master of the runes and of hidden knowledge. In the fifth canto, entitled *Rúnatal* (*Enumeration of the Runes*), he recounts his own hanging for nine nights from the cosmic tree, Yggdrasill, and his initiation into the runes and all the practices they entail: knowing how to carve them, interpreting their meaning, colouring them, testing their power, praying, and making sacrifices. And the *Sigrdrifumál* (*Sigrdrífa's Sayings*) distinguish between different runes according to the magical powers sought: the runes of victory (*sigrúnar*), which must be inscribed on a sword; those of beer (*ǫlrúnar*), which must be engraved on a drinking horn so as not to be deceived by another man's wife; those of aid (*bjargrúnar*), on the palm of the hand, to ensure a swift delivery for women in labour; the breakwater runes (*brimrúnar*), on the bow and rudder, to prevent shipwreck; and others still, which Sigrdrífa, the Valkyrie teaching them to Sigurðr who roused her from her magical slumber, attributes specifically to Óðinn.

The divine origin attributed to the runes in these Eddic texts is attested in several runic inscriptions dating from well before the Viking Age, such as the late 6th-century inscription at Noleby (Västergötland) in Sweden, where the engraver wrote: <**runo fahi raginakudo**>, 'I paint the runes that come from the gods'. But belief in their supernatural power was not disproved thereafter. 'And interprets these runes that come from the gods', engraves their author on the Swedish stone of Sparlösa in the 9th century; and the stone of Hällestad (in Scania, then Danish), from the early 11th century, is described in the inscription it bears as being <**stuþan runum**>, 'strengthened by the runes'.

The magical use of runes finds its place in literature within the Icelandic sagas, such as the saga dedicated to the skald Egill Skallagrímsson, himself well-versed in magic. Thus, to escape the poison poured into his drinking horn at the instigation of Queen Gunnhildr, Egill carves runes into it and lets his blood flow over them: the horn shatters into pieces. To curse King Eiríkr *Blóðøx*, he erects a pillar of shame (*níðstǫng*), a pole of

hazel pole on which he impales a horse's head and also carves runes. Finally, he saves the life of a young girl whom a neighbour's rejected son had made ill by attempting, without knowing what he was doing, to carve 'love runes' (*manrúnar*) onto a piece of ski: he burns them and carves others which cure her.

Alongside the many runic texts that are generally intelligible – and indeed included within these texts – one encounters here and there words, phrases or individual runes whose use for magical purposes is beyond doubt. Starting with several complete sequences of runic characters in their invariable order of succession, which in some cases appear to be a way of concentrating their powers: *the* Germanic *fuþark* as seen in the 6th century on the bracteates (precious metal medallions) from Grumpan and Vadstena in Sweden, *the* Anglo-Saxon *fuþorc* on the 8th-century scramasax (single-edged short sword) found in the Thames, or *the* Scandinavian *fuþark* engraved in the 12th century on a bone discovered in Sigtuna, also in Sweden.

As each rune has an ideographic meaning, the engraver can use it to represent the concept it signifies – a deity, a sacred plant, a meteorological or ritual phenomenon – and thus seek to influence the course of events, either by engraving it on its own, once or several times, or by repeating the same group of runes in order to reinforce their power. The rune <**f**> (**fehu*, in Common Germanic [*fé*, in Old Norse], 'cattle', 'wealth'), for example, is repeated three times on the now-lost early 7th-century stone at Gummarp (in Blekinge, then Danish) in order to attract prosperity. In the inscription (probably from the 6th century) on the shaft of a spear, broken into three pieces, found in the Kragehul marsh in Funen (Denmark), the linked runes <**ga**> are also repeated three times and only make sense when their mental representation is combined: <**g**> **gebō* [*gjǫf*], 'gift', and (**ansuz* [*áss*], 'axe'), perhaps 'a gift to the god'. On the Lindholmen amulet (Skåne), a piece of horn engraved in the 6th century, the second line consists solely of runes repeated for magical purposes: eight , three <**R**> (**algiz* [*elgr*], "élan"), three <**n**> (**nauþiz* [*nauð*], "distress"), and three <**t**> (**tiwaz*, 'Týr'), and ends with the word <**alu**>.

This is one of those few mysterious words. It literally means " beer " (*ǫl*) but has probably also the meaning of 'protection'. <**laukaR**> is another, found mainly engraved on bracteates: it refers, amongst other things, to 'garlic' (*laukr*) – it is also one of the two names of the rune <**l**> (**laukaz*) – and is no doubt intended to bring health and prosperity to their owners. There is also, for example, the word <**laþu**> (*lǫð*, 'invitation') which, in its magical usage, corresponds more to 'incantation'.

As for the inscriptions, some are brief, others more elaborate, and they are often difficult to interpret. On weapons, their purpose is to make them more effective: in Denmark, the inscription <**ojinggaR**> on the tip of the Illerup spear (c. 200) means 'the one who spreads terror'; in Norway, <**raunijaR**> on the spearhead of Øvre Stabu (3rd century), 'which puts to the test'. On jewellery and other objects, they transform them into amulets and talismans: in Norway, the Strand fibula (c. 700) bears the inscription <**siklisnahli**>, 'the brooch is a protection against the dead', in other words, the revenants; and in Denmark, on the bronze belt buckle from Viborg (Jutland) dating from the early 10th century, <**lukisliua**>, 'this is the end of misfortunes'. The strange formula <**þmk iii sss ttt iii lll**>, which should be read as *þistill mistill kistill*, literally 'thistle, mistletoe, casket", and which appears for the first time on the Gørlev stone, is subsequently found in various forms: on the Swedish Ledberg stone (early 11th century), on the wall of the Norwegian stave church at Borgund, and in half a dozen other medieval inscriptions. It is even reproduced, in runic characters and in an expanded form comprising six runes, in support of an evil incantation in the text of a legendary saga, *Bósa saga ok Herrauðs* (*The Saga of Bósi and Herrauðr*), dating from around 1350.

Magic features prominently in inscriptions in *the* Old *Futhark* (particularly in the Nordic region); it is less prevalent during the Viking Age but persists into the late Middle Ages, by which time the region had become Christian.

On the Björketorp stone (Blekinge), likely situated at a ancient place of worship, the runic text, carved around the mid-7th century, bears all the hallmarks of magical incantatory chant (*galdr*):

> 'A prophecy of doom. The series of radiant runes, the magical runes, I have hidden them here. May he remain outside without respite, and

may he who breaks this be slain by treachery."

In Norway, in Sogn, the Eggja stone (8th century), which was part of a plundered and partially destroyed burial site, bears a very long magical inscription that begins with these words: 'Untouched by the sun, uncut by an iron knife, the stone. ' Then two prohibitions are pronounced: 'Let no one lay it bare, let no one move it whilst the moon wanes!' Next, some of the funeral rites are mentioned, for this stone, the officiant has, among other things,
"sprinkled with the sea of the corpse [= blood], he rubbed it onto the oarlocks of the little bear [= the boat], worn out by the holes that had been bored […]" And the inscription ends with a phrase containing the word <**alu**>: <**alumisurki**> – a
'protection' against grave robbers or perhaps a reference to the 'beer' of the funeral.

In Denmark, on the Nørre Nærå stone (Funen), the inscription, dated from the 9th century, contains a phrase forbidding the deceased from returning to haunt the world of the living: <**niąut kubls**>, 'Enjoy the grave!' And on another stone in Funen, erected in the 10th century by a wife in memory of her husband at Glavendrup, the epitaph ends with a curse:

> "May he who destroys this stone or moves it to the memory of another be accursed!"

From the Viking Age onwards, magical sequences were primarily engraved on a wide variety of objects of all sizes. A tiny Swedish copper plate (the size of a fingernail) from the 9th century, found in a burial mound at Ulvsunda, bears some thirty runes, barely 2 or 3 millimetres high and barely legible, probably a spell cast against the deceased. A death threat is inscribed on a 10th-century bone shuttle from a loom, discovered in Lund, a threat from a woman seeking revenge for the infidelity of a certain Ingimárr:
"He'll get my tears." And as late as the 14th century, an erotic spell was carved onto a small stick, discovered in Bergen, with the aim of winning a woman's love:

> “I engrave runes of salvation, I engrave runes of protection, once against the elves, twice against the trolls, three times against the giants. […] I bewitch you, she-wolf, I send you wicked torment and troubled anguish. […] Love me as you love yourself (<**ant mer sem sialpre þer**>).”

This is followed by an incomprehensible magic spell.

But of course, whilst runes may have been used for magical purposes since the beginning of our era, they remain nonetheless a means of writing like any other. In the Middle Ages, they were used just as much for carving graffiti as for writing private messages (including romantic, even erotic ones) or serving as marks of ownership for merchants. Archaeology has unearthed a large number of these runic texts: from the simple ‘kiss me! ” <**kys mik**>, carved around 1100 on a small cow bone found in Oslo’s old town, to this message carved on wood around 1200 in Bergen: “Þorkell sends you pepper”, a message that must have accompanied the parcel!

26
Did the Vikings sacrifice human beings?

> "In this most sacred place still stands the stone of Þórr, upon which those offered as sacrifices were broken, not far from the court of judgement where they were condemned to be sacrificed."
>
> *Landnámabók* (*Sturlubók*, c. 1275)

In Old Norse, the noun *blót* ('sacrifice') describes a whole set of ritual practices for which the Vikings had a verb: *blóta* ('to sacrifice'). Animal sacrifices were commonly practised: they are mentioned both in the laws introduced in Iceland during the island's colonisation and in the Icelandic sagas. All manner of animals were sacrificed – but the pig was the one that best symbolised abundance and prosperity. Oxen and bulls were also offered as sacrifices, and the horse enjoyed a special favour. After consulting the omens (*ganga til frétta*) from the sacrificial blood, the sacrificial feast (*blótveizla*) served as a form of communion between the participants as much as with the gods. The flesh of the sacrificed animals and the broth in which it is cooked are consumed, and beer and mead are drunk until intoxication in honour of the gods and in memory of the dead (*drekka minni*).

But did the Vikings also sacrifice humans?

Bishop Thietmar of Merseburg, around 1015, describes in his *Chronicle* how the Danes, gathering every nine years in January at *Lederun* (Lejre, where the almost legendary *Skjǫldungar* dynasty once resided), on the island of Zealand, 'sacrifice to their gods ninety-nine men and as many horses, as well as dogs and chickens', in order to atone for the crimes they have committed. He pays tribute to

Henry Iof Germany, who, he explains, put an end to this horrible custom after his victory over the Danes (in 934, a victory which enabled him to annex Schleswig).

Adam of Bremen, in his *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg*, also describes sacrificial festivals, held in Sweden every nine years at the great temple *of Ubsola,* which houses the idols of the gods *Thor* (Þórr), *Wodan* (Óðinn) and *Fricco* (Freyr):

> "Nine representatives of every kind of creature are offered, through whose blood it is customary to appease the gods. The bodies are hung in a grove near the temple. […] In addition to human beings, dogs and horses are also hung there, and a Christian told me that he had seen seventy-two bodies hanging together."

And Saxo, in his *Gesta Danorum*, also mentions these sacrifices once practised in Sweden, "the slaughter of human victims so that they might serve as horrific offerings to the gods".

But neither of them witnessed the cultic activities they describe.

Nor did Dudon of Saint-Quentin, who, at the beginning of the 11th century, describes in his **History of the Normans** the sacrifice which, according to him, the 'Goths' the ancient Scandinavians, before setting out on an expedition, in honour of their god *Thur* (Þórr) to whom, he specifies, they offered not animals but men, because their blood was more valuable:

> 'When the priest-diviner chose the victims, they were cruelly struck on the head, with a single blow, using an ox yoke, and as soon as one of them, chosen by lot, had his skull shattered by a violent blow and lay on the ground, they sought out the fibre of his

heart, that is to say, the vein. After collecting the blood, they smeared it on their own heads and those of their companions in accordance with their customs, then hastened to offer their ships' sails to the winds."

According to the *Guta saga* (*Saga of the Gutar*), a Swedish text dating from around 1220, the inhabitants of the island of Gotland 'sacrificed their children and livestock and offered food and beer'. And the *Jómsvíkinga saga* recounts how *Jarl* Hákon, unable to overcome the formidable Vikings of Jómsborg at the Battle of *Hjǫrungavágr*, offered his seven-year-old son, Erlingr, as a sacrifice to his guardian goddess, Þorgerðr *Hǫlgabrúðr*. Furthermore, the *Landnámabók* says of a Norwegian Viking named Ǫlvir: 'He is nicknamed *barnavinr* ("friend of children") because he does not allow children to be thrown onto the tips of spears, as was the custom at the time.' English and Irish sources also mention this type of sacrifice.

Several Icelandic sagas, which must necessarily be treated with caution, mention human sacrifices. It is not inconceivable that this practice existed in pagan Iceland, but it is also possible that the authors of these texts, in the 13th century, were referring to much older, non-Icelandic traditions.

The *Kjalnesinga saga*, for example, describes the temple (*hof*) of Þorgrímr at Kjalarnes, where animals or men are sacrificed to Þórr. Their blood is collected in a large copper vessel, the flesh of the animals is consumed during the feast, and the human bodies are thrown into a marsh (*fen*) situated at the temple gates and called *blótkelda* ('sacrificial mire'). The *Vatnsdæla saga* depicts the sinisterly reputed Þórólfr *heljarskinn* emerging from his sacrificial pits (*blótgrafar*), likely offering wells, as he is suspected of 'sacrificing both humans and animals'.

In *the Eyrbyggja saga* (just as in the *Landnámabók*), there is mention of men condemned to be sacrificed (*dœmdir til blóts*): their spines are broken on a stone dedicated to Þórr, 'on which the colour of blood can still be seen'. And the *Kristni saga* recounts that at the time of Iceland's Christianisation, the pagans decided, during a meeting of *the Alþing*, to sacrifice two men from each 'district' (*fjórðungr*) of the island and to invoke their gods to oppose the new religion.

The ultimate sacrifice is that of the king, if we are to believe *the Ynglinga saga*, which Snorri Sturluson wrote based on *the Ynglingatal*, the poem by Þjóðólfr of *the Hvínir* (died c. 930): in Sweden, several kings of the quasi-legendary *Ynglingar* dynasty were sacrificed, for the *Svíar* 'attributed both prosperity and scarcity to their sovereign'. Thus, as Domaldi's reign was marked by famine and scarcity, the *Svíar* first sacrificed oxen, then men, but to no avail. They then decided to offer their king as a sacrifice, 'to kill him and stain the altars with his blood'. And one of the last kings of this dynasty, Óláfr *trételgja* ('the woodcutter'), driven out *of Uppsala*, set about clearing the forests of *Vermaland* (Värmland), but the *Svíar* held him responsible for the poor harvests and the famine: they burn him alive in the house where he is found "and offer him as a sacrifice to Óðinn in order to secure prosperity".

It is also worth mentioning a particular form of sacrifice to Óðinn, which some historians cast doubt upon: the blood eagle (*blóðǫrn*). It involves cutting open the victim's back and tearing out their lungs to spread them out like wings. It is an unusual ritual, described only four times and exclusively within medieval Scandinavian literature. In the *Orkneyinga saga*, *Jarl* Torf-Einarr performs this ritual on Hálfdan *háleggr* (one of King Haraldr *hárfagri's* sons), the murderer of his father, *Jarl* Rǫgnvaldr. Saxo, in his *Gesta Danorum*, also mentions the figure of an eagle engraved on the back of the Northumbrian king Ella by the sons of *Regnerus* (Ragnarr *loðbrók*) – just as the *Ragnars saga loðbrókar* and the *Ragnarssona þáttr* do: the latter, incidentally, quotes a stanza from Sigvatr Þórðarson's *Knútsdrápa*:

> 'On Ella's back,
> Ívarr, who sat in Jórvík, had the blood eagle carved."

The other two instances appear in legendary texts: *the *Orms þáttr Stórólfssonar** (*The Tale of Ormr Stórólfsson*), a 14th-century account in which Ormr inflicts this sacrifice on the troll named Brúsi, the murderer of his sworn brother Ásbjǫrn; and the *Reginsmál*, in which the hero Sigurðr does battle with the sons of Hundingr, then cuts the eagle of blood from one of them,

King Lyngvi, who had killed Sigmundr, his father. It is worth noting that in all cases, this is an act of vengeance for the death of a close relative.

In addition to written sources, several pictorial representations provide evidence of human sacrifice. A scene carved on one of the Lärbro runestones (8th century, on the island of Gotland) depicts the sacrifice of a man lying on an altar, a sacrifice to Óðinn as suggested by the image of the bird – a raven? – above him and that of the hanged man. And in Norway, on one of the fragments of the tapestry discovered in the Oseberg burial mound, we see nine men hanging from a large tree, with snakes beneath them and three women – perhaps the Norns (female deities who preside over the fate, good or bad, of humans)? – above.

The ritual hangings of men, women and animals are confirmed by Aḥmad ibn Rustah's description of the practices of the Varangians in 10th-century Russia.

And Aḥmad ibn Faḍlān's account of the funeral of a Rus' chieftain in 922 provides us with an authentic account of a funeral ritual, despite possible influences other than Scandinavian ones. Placing the deceased, sumptuously dressed, in the burial boat with a wealth of goods and sacrificed animals, the presence of a priestess (*gyðja*) whom the Arab diplomat calls 'the Angel of Death', the consumption of *nabīdh* (clearly the beer with which they get drunk) and, before the boat is set alight and the mound is built on the site of the pyre, the sacrifice of a young slave girl (aged fourteen or fifteen) who volunteered, described in minute detail and ending thus:

> 'Six men all had sexual intercourse with the girl, then they laid her down beside her master. Two of them seized her feet, two others her hands, then the Angel of Death placed a rope around her neck and handed the ends to the remaining two so that they might pull. He then approached her holding a dagger with a broad blade and plunged it repeatedly between her ribs, whilst the two men strangled her with the rope until she died."

A number of burials from the 9th and 10th centuries appear to provide evidence that human sacrifices took place during funerals, although

that it is often difficult to conclude that the presence of two or more deceased individuals in the same grave is not simply due to a group of people being buried together – a husband and wife, for example, or a family who fell victim to an epidemic. At Lejre, one grave contains the skeletons of two adult men: one, lying on his back, is richly furnished; the other, lying on top of him with his hands and feet bound, has been decapitated. This may be a sacrificed slave – just as in several burials at Flakstad in the Lofoten Islands (Norway), or in these two female burials in Denmark: one at Dråby, where the second skeleton is that of a decapitated man, and the other at Gerdrup, where it is a man whose feet are bound and whose neck is broken.

Archaeological evidence also points to the existence of sites dedicated to ritual sacrifices, including human sacrifices. This is the case at the extensive Tissø estate in Denmark, where, near the great hall, animal and human bones were discovered at a sacrificial site. And at Trelleborg, in five wells that existed prior to the construction of the fortress around 980, the remains of animals (horses and dogs) and human bones were found, alongside jewellery and tools – notably those of four young children aged between four and seven.

Both written and archaeological sources therefore attest to human sacrifices among the Vikings, particularly during religious or funeral ceremonies. Whilst they do not allow us, in the absence of further evidence, to assume that the practice was widespread, it is clear that it existed. However, as the Scandinavian Iron Age drew to a close and the Viking Age began, it appears that human sacrifices became less frequent: they would not cease entirely until Christianity was firmly established.

27
Did the Vikings easily switch from the hammer of Þórr to the cross of Christ?

> ‘If we can enjoy the favour of our gods, it is good to have the favour of this one [= the Christian God] who always and in all things can and will help those who call upon him.’
>
> Rimbert of Bremen, *Vita Anskarii*, c. 870

The Vikings, who were pagans, came into frequent contact with Christians: not only through violent acts such as attacking churches and monasteries, but also through their interactions with the Christian populations with whom they traded or lived alongside. The *prima signatio*, which they sometimes accepted as a condition for dealing with Christians—a first ‘sign of the cross’ that committed them to little—also gave them access to a different religious world.

Among the Norwegians who settled in Iceland, many passed through the Celtic lands – where others also settled. The *Landnámabók* records settlers who had previously been baptised in the Hebrides or in Ireland. Celtic-Nordic relations around the Irish Sea led to a lasting Christian influence. As for the Vikings

, who, for their part, invaded and colonised the east and north of England, they too eventually came to terms with Christianity, notably in York – an example followed by Rollo in Normandy.

In Scandinavia, Christianisation took place at different rates, depending on missionary efforts from both outside and within. In Denmark, the first baptisms were administered as early as 823 by Ebbon, Archbishop of Reims, sent by Louis the Pious, and then in 826 by Anschaire, a monk from Corbie, whom we know of thanks to the *Vita Anskarii* written about him by his disciple Rimbert. But it was not until 950 that the mission gained fresh momentum and converted the Danish king Haraldr *blátǫnd*, who, around 985, had a crucifixion depicted on the Jelling Stone and inscribed in runes that he had Christianised the Danes. Some twenty years earlier, Ibrāhīm ibn Ya'qūb had already noted that in Hedeby 'a small number of Christians had a church'.

Norway had its first Christian king as early as 934, in the person of Hákon *the Good*, but he failed to instil his faith in his subjects; it was King Óláfr Tryggvason who, if the saga dedicated to him is to be believed, demonstrated formidable evangelical zeal during his five-year reign (995–1000), no doubt driven by a thirst for power and extraordinary religious fanaticism. His work was completed by Óláfr Haraldsson, the future Saint Óláfr, upon whose death in 1030 the whole of Norway was converted.

It was also Óláfr Tryggvason who imposed Christianity on the Faroe Islands, with the help of the young Faroese chieftain Sigmundr Brestisson, who had converted to the new religion and to the king's cause (as recounted in the *Færeyinga saga*), and in Iceland, by sending missionaries such as Þangbrandr, whose effectiveness was matched only by his violence (as recounted in the *Kristni saga*). In 999 (or 1000), following a heated debate in *the Alþing*, the new religion was officially established: the law obliged Icelanders who had not yet been baptised to do so.

Finally, in Sweden, following an initial mission by Anschaire to Birka in 830, which yielded only fleeting results, it was not until the end of the 11th century that Christianity made a breakthrough, symbolised by the construction of the church *at Uppsala* to replace the pagan temple described by Adam of Bremen. The country's conversion was not completed until the second half of the 12th century.

The weakness of paganism in the face of the Christian religion undoubtedly lay in its lack of dogma and a priestly class. There is no unity in the cult itself: everyone is free to choose a god and to revere him as their *ástvinr*, that is to say, a friend and protector; this does not prevent them from acknowledging the existence of other deities and taking part in sacrifices in their honour.

Þórr's central place in Viking beliefs is, moreover, confirmed as Christianity gained ground. The texts even reflect this shift in attitudes. In the 9th century, when the Christian faith did not yet threaten the 'old custom' (*forn siðr*), pagans viewed Christ with tolerance – as demonstrated in Sweden by the *Vita Anskarii*. Iceland also offers examples of religious coexistence and syncretism. Thus Helgi *magri*, an Icelandic settler raised in Ireland, believed in Christ: he named the place where he settled *Kristnes* ('Christ's Cape'). But the *Landnámabók* indicates that he also invokes Þórr when in danger, especially at sea, and defines this attitude as follows: he is 'of a very mixed faith [*mjǫk blandinn i trúnni*]'. Another settler, Ørlyggr Hrappsson, left the Hebrides for Iceland with an iron bell, a liturgical book, consecrated earth and all the timber needed to build a church (which he dedicated to Saint Columba, in *Patreksfjǫrðr* (the 'fjord of [Saint] Patrick'). His companion and sworn brother, Kollr, on the other hand, invokes Þórr.

The situation is already less straightforward half a century later, when Hákon *the Good*, a Christian king raised in England, took control of Norway in 933. *The Ágríp af Nóregskonungasǫgum* (*Summary of the Histories of the Kings of Norway*) states that he had several churches built and appointed priests to them. Whilst some of his subjects converted or renounced their sacrifices, others burned down the churches, killed the priests and forced Hákon to abandon his plan to Christianise the whole country. The *Hákonar saga*, which describes the sacrifices offered by *Jarl* Sigurðr in the temple at *Mærin* in the king's presence, records the growing antagonism.

But where Hákon failed, Óláfr Tryggvason succeeded in breaking the resistance to the spread of Christianity. In that very temple of *Mærin*, Snorri recounts in *the Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar*, King Óláfr stepped forward towards the idol of Þórr and struck it such a blow with his axe that it fell from its pedestal. The people of *Þrándheimr* (Trøndelag) were quick to be baptised. Nevertheless, the cult of Þórr retained its followers and we

Worth noting is the account in **Óláfs saga helga** of Óláfr Haraldsson's visit to the temple of Guðbrandr. When the idol of Þórr was brought before *the þing* and all the pagans bowed down before it, the king told them to look eastwards to see his God in his greatest glory – in other words, the sun. At that moment, one of the king's men struck the idol with his club; it shattered, and a multitude of rats and snakes (which had been feeding on the offerings of bread and meat) poured out.

The veneration of Þórr in the face of the Christian God is also widely attested elsewhere: in Sweden, around 1030, as Adam of Bremen recounts in his **Gesta Hammaburgensis**, a missionary named Wilfred insulted his idol and smashed it with an axe. The pagans threw Wilfred's body into a marsh, an act that would earn him the status of a martyr. In Iceland, at the end of the 10th century, several skalds celebrated the exploits of Þórr and mocked the brutal mission of Þangbrandr (997–998), sometimes at the risk of their own lives (such as Vetrliði Sumarliðason). Among them was Steinunn Refsdóttir: the *Kristni saga* quotes two of her stanzas, rich in *kenningar*, on the occasion of the missionary's shipwreck, in which she declares that Þórr had smashed the priest's boat and that Christ had not protected him. The *Njáls saga* also recounts that Steinunn asks Þangbrandr if he knows that Þórr challenged Christ to a duel, but that Christ did not dare to face him.

This means that Þórr is elevated to the status of Christ's rival: likewise Just as the gods rely on Þórr to defend Ásgarðr against the giants, the pagans see him as the most capable of defending them against Christian domination. In Denmark, several 10th-century runestones invoke Þórr's protection: 'May Þórr consecrate these runes' is inscribed on the Glavendrup stone; 'May Þórr consecrate this monument', reads the Virring stone. Sometimes the simple phrase 'May Þórr consecrate' (<**Þur uiki**>) is found, and sometimes even just his hammer is depicted, as on the Læborg stone.

Yet this was a time when Christianity was gaining ground in Denmark: the formula may have been inspired by the Christian blessing, with the hammer replacing the cross that Christians depicted on their stelae. Moreover, the small hammers of Þórr, used as amulets, may have rivalled the crosses worn as pendants. Archaeology has even unearthed several foundry moulds, such as the one at Trendgården (in Jutland), which were used by the same craftsman to cast two crosses and a hammer simultaneously.

The Icelandic skald Hallfreðr *vandræðaskáld* (‘the difficult skald’), a pagan but close friend of King Óláfr Tryggvason, agreed to be baptised only on condition that the king be his godfather. In his verses, he expresses the torments of his conscience: he regrets no longer being able to celebrate Óðinn, whose power he admired, since he now serves Christ.

One of the difficulties in the transition from paganism to Christianity lies precisely in the intolerance of the new religion: the Church does not tolerate other gods, whom it regards as demons and forces of evil. Freyja, the great goddess of the Vikings and a symbol of fertility, is, in the eyes of the Church, an object of ridicule and contempt, all the more so because Christianity presents a resolutely masculine image of God.

The fact remains that, once the balance of power between the pagan gods and the Christian God had been shifted, the Church, when unopposed, sought to emphasise a certain continuity. Churches are built on the sites of former places of worship; certain rites are Christianised, for example by transforming the anointing of the newborn into baptism or pagan festivals and their sacrifices into Christian ones – the *sumarblót* becomes Easter, *haustblót* into St Michael’s Day, *jólablót* into Christmas – whilst retaining a few Old Norse words such as *jól* to denote Christmas, but also *guð* for ‘God’, and *heilagr* to translate ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’; and for ‘hell’, a compound word is formed from *hel* (‘the realm of the dead’) by adding a second element, *viti* (‘punishment’): *helviti*. *The Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar* describes a funeral feast where libations are no longer offered to Óðinn, Þórr or Freyr, but in memory of Christ (*Krists minni*) and Saint Michael (*Mikjáls minni*): the ceremony is the same, only the recipients of the libations have changed. In popular imagery, the saints gradually replaced the Aesir – including Scandinavian saints (Óláfr in Norway, Knútr in Denmark, Eiríkr in Sweden, etc.) – and the guardian angel succeeded the *fylgjur* or *hamingjur*. Even the Christian concept of the soul (*sál*) may stem from the pagan concept of *hugr*, that is, the spirit, the mind of man, which can escape and even take on a form (*hamr*). And to satisfy the Vikings’ warrior ideal, the Church endeavoured to emphasise the image of the victorious Christ rather than his suffering on the Cross. On the other hand, it made no concessions regarding sacrifices (*blót*) and the consumption of horse meat, the exposure of newborns (*útburðr*), duels (*hólmganga*) and magic (*seiðr*).

But beneath this apparent continuity lie profound upheavals. By winning the battle for the Vikings' 'souls', the Church stripped their daily lives of their religious dimension. Christian worship was practised exclusively within churches, which were set aside for that purpose, never in the countryside or on the farm. The dead were buried only in consecrated ground, no longer near their homes and their descendants. When they took part in pagan sacrifices, fuelled by fervour and libations, the Vikings felt more united than ever with the gods they worshipped. But the Church taught that men were sinners and that, to avoid hell, only the redemption of sins could ensure eternal life. Yet neither hell nor eternal life were pagan concepts. A rigid framework was finally imposed on the new converts: the calendar of religious festivals compelled them to rest, fast and practise abstinence. Marriage became a sacrament – and monogamy the rule (although cohabitation persisted until the 14th century!).

In many respects, *forn siðr* allowed for a relatively
easy. But whilst paganism is a simple religion – religious practices are woven into social life and the gods are seen as the guarantors of everything people are entitled to expect from them, above all peace and prosperity – the Christian conception of the relationship between man and God is far more complex.

28
Has the language of the Vikings rubbed off on French?

> 'An Englishman cannot *thrive* or be *ill* or *die* without Scandinavian words: they are to the language what bread and eggs are to daily life.'
>
> Otto JESPERSEN, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, 1905

Since the 18th century, French has borrowed more than thirty words from the Scandinavian languages, ranging from 'rutabaga' (Swedish) to 'krill' (Norwegian), including 'édredon' (Danish) and 'geyser' (Icelandic). However, around fifty other words still in use today derive directly from the language of the Vikings. Indeed, the languages of all the peoples affected by the Viking settlements have, to varying degrees, retained a certain amount of Norse vocabulary.

English is undoubtedly the language that has been most strongly influenced. In England, before Old Norse ceased to be spoken altogether (probably in the 12th century), the number of everyday words that found their way into Old English suggests that the two cultures coexisted and assimilated. And the fact that the two languages are relatively close

favoured the borrowing of words. Many borrowed words have since disappeared, but over a thousand have survived in the rural dialects of the regions where the Vikings settled. For example, the verb *'addle'*,
'to acquire' (from Old Norse *ǫðlask*) or the noun *cleg*, 'horsefly' (from *kleggi*).

And there are nearly four hundred words, the use of which eventually spread throughout England, which are now among the most frequently used in modern English.

This is everyday vocabulary, consisting mainly of nouns: for example, *knife*, 'knife' (from *knífr*, same meaning), *bag*, 'bag' (from *baggi*, same meaning), *root*, 'root' (from *rót*, same meaning), *cake*, 'cake' (from *kaka*, same meaning), *gap*, 'gap' (from *gap*, same meaning), *fellow*,
'companion' (from *félagi*, 'associate', 'partner'); but also adjectives such as *low*, 'low' (from *lágr*, same meaning), *wrong*, 'wrong' (from *rangr*, same meaning), *meek*, 'meek' (from *mjúkr*, same meaning), *loose*, 'loose' (from *lauss*, same meaning); and verbs such as *take*, 'take' (from *taka*, same meaning), *cast*, 'to throw' (from *kasta*, same meaning), *screech*, 'to scream' (from *skrækja*, same meaning), *thrive*, 'to prosper' (from *þrifask*, same meaning), *clip*, 'to cut' (from *klippa*, same meaning), *give*, 'to give' (from *gefa*, same meaning), *die*, 'to die' (from *deyja*, same meaning).

Some words have sometimes taken on a completely different meaning in English, such as *'sky'*,
'sky' (from Old Norse *ský*, meaning 'cloud'), *anger*, 'anger' (from *angr*, 'grief'), *husband*, 'husband' (from *húsbóndi*, 'master of the house'), *kid*,
'child' (from *kið*, 'kid'), and *ill*, 'ill' (from *illr*, 'bad'). However, *kid* also means 'kid' in English, and the Old Norse meaning of *illr* survives in the expression *to be ill-tempered*, 'to have a bad temper'. *Skirt*,
'skirt' (from Old Norse *skyrta*, tunic), has passed this meaning on to the Old English word *scyrte*, which has become today's *shirt*, 'shirt'. Sometimes a loanword from Old Norse ends up replacing a word derived from Old English, such as *window*,
'window' (from *vindauga*, same meaning) instead of *ēgþyrl*, or *sister*, 'sister' (from *systir*, same meaning), instead of *sweostor*; sometimes it coexists, with a slightly different meaning, such as *skin*, 'skin' (from Old Norse *skinn*, same meaning) and *hide*, 'animal skin', from Old English *hyd*, or the adjectives *ill* (from Old Norse *illr*) and *sick*, from Old English *seoc*.

Even grammatical words, which are not usually borrowed easily, have passed from Old Norse into English: the prepositions *till* and *upon* come from the Old Norse *til* and *upp á*; and the third-person personal pronouns

The plural pronouns *'they'*, *'them' and 'their*', derived respectively from Old Norse *'þeir'*, *'þeim'* (the dative of *'þeir'*) and *'þeir'* (the genitive of *'þeir'*), replace the original Old English pronouns *'hīe'*, *'him'* and *'heora'*, which might have been too easily confused with those of the third-person singular (masculine *hē* and feminine *hēo* in the nominative; masculine *him* in the dative and feminine *hīe* in the accusative). This is a sign of profound influence.

The Celtic languages, which were only just beginning to diverge during the Viking Age, were also influenced by Old Norse, though to a more limited extent.

It is estimated that in Scottish Gaelic, almost two hundred words derive from Old Norse, including words relating to fishing and navigation, as well as to everyday life. They are found in greatest numbers in the Hebrides, and particularly on the island of Lewis where the Viking settlement was strongest, but they remain in all the coastal regions of western Scotland. For example, the nouns *òb*, 'cove' (from *hóp*, same meaning), *lòban*, 'basket' (from *laupr*, basket, wickerwork), *being*, 'bench' (from *bekkr*, same meaning), *cuidh*, 'sheep pen' (from *kví*, same meaning), *sgarbh*, 'cormorant' (from *skarfr*, same meaning), *trosg*, 'cod' (from *þorskr*, same meaning).

Conversely, in the archipelagos of northern Scotland, where the ancient Pictish language was supplanted by that of the Vikings – which persisted under the name *'Norn'* until the 17th century and even beyond – it was this *Norn language* that borrowed a few words from Scottish Gaelic: *blathick* (in the Orkneys) and *bleddick* (in the Shetlands), 'buttermilk' (from the Gaelic *bláthach*, same meaning); or *krue* (in the Orkneys) and *krö* (in Shetland), 'sheep pen' (from the Gaelic *cró*, same meaning). And today, the Shetland and Orkney dialects, derived from the Scottish English dialect known as *Scots*, are still marked by the Norse lexical heritage.

Manx Gaelic nearly disappeared in the 20th century, but efforts are being made to revive it. When Norse, which had been the dominant language of the island for over two centuries, ceased to be spoken during the 14th century, Gaelic re-established itself, leading to the disappearance of many lexical borrowings: their number is now smaller than in Scottish Gaelic; the linguistic influence is limited primarily to place names. Today, the islanders' English dialect, itself now in danger of disappearing, nevertheless retains a few such words, such as *spret*,

'jump' (from *sprettr*, leap, jump), *darrag*, 'fishing line' (from *dorg*, same meaning) or *oalsom*, 'shackle' (from *halda*, to hold, and *sími*, bond).

In Irish Gaelic, there are only around sixty words borrowed from Old Norse, despite a three-century-long Scandinavian presence in Ireland. Only about twenty of these remain in common use today, in the maritime sphere, such as *accaire*, 'anchor' (from *akkeri*, same meaning), *sreang*, 'rope' (from *strengr*, same meaning), but not exclusively: *fuinneog*, 'window' (from *vindauga*, same meaning), *punann*, 'sheaf' (from *bundin*, same meaning) or *pónaire*, 'beans' (from *baunir*, same meaning).

In contrast, Old Norse had very little influence on the other Celtic languages, which borrowed only a very few words: in Welsh, *gardd*, 'enclosure, garden' (from *garðr*, same meaning), and *iarll*, 'earl' (from *jarl*); and in Breton, *staon*, ' ' 'bow' ' ' (from *stafn*, same meaning), or again *stur*, 'rudder' (from *stýri*, same meaning).

The same applies to the Slavic languages: there are very few loanwords here too. Thus, in Russian, *sel'd'*, 'herring', comes from Old Norse *síld* (same meaning); *kniaz'*, 'prince', from *konungr* (king; in Common Germanic **kuningaz*); *jakor'*, 'anchor', from *akkeri* or **ankari* (same meaning); *jaščik*, 'box, casket', from *askr* or *eski* (ashwood casket); *knut*, 'whip, knout', from *knútr* (knot). They are attested respectively in the older forms *selĭdĭ* (**sĭldĭ*), *kŭnęzĭ*, *ękorĭ*, *askŭ/jaskŭ*, *knutŭ***.** Norse itself, moreover, adopted two Old Slavic words, which became: *túlkr*, 'interpreter' (from *tŭlkŭ* / *tolkŭ*, same meaning; in Russian *tolk*, 'interpretation', 'meaning'), and *torg*, 'market, square' (from *torgŭ*, with the same meaning; and in Russian *torg*, 'bargaining, negotiation') – still in use in modern Scandinavian languages as *tolk* for the former and *torg* (Swedish) / *torv* (Danish) for the latter.

As for French, it was via Normandy – where the Oïl languages borrowed some 150 Old Norse words during the 10th century – that it inherited around 50 of them, the majority of which have maritime connotations.

Some relate to ships and navigation. The word 'quille' (from Old Norse *kjǫlr*, plural *kilir*, same meaning) is lined internally with a 'carlingue' (from *'kerling'*, the mast step) and serves as a support for the 'strakes' (from *vrang*, same meaning). The 'planking' refers to the 'planks' (from *borð*, a plank of the hull), the 'deck' (from *þilja*, the floor

of a boat, deck) rests on the baux, and a mooring ‘poller’ (from *biti*, a transverse beam of a deck) is fixed to the deck. The ‘bow’ (from *stafn*, same meaning) forms the stern. The ‘mast collar’ (from *rakki*, mast collar) is located at the top of the mast, held in place by the ‘shrouds’ (from *hǫfuðbenda*, same meaning – literally ‘head [of mast] tie’) and the ‘stays’ (from *stag*, same meaning, or from Old English *stæg*). The hull of the ship is pierced by ‘dalots’ (from *dæla*, drainage channel) above the waterline to allow water to drain away. There are the ‘ris’ (from *rif*, same meaning), horizontal strips of a sail that are folded to reduce the surface area exposed to the wind, the ‘écoute’ (from *skaut*, corner of a sail), the rope attached to the lower corners of the sail and used to adjust its angle, the ‘bouline’ (from *bóglína*, same meaning), a rope attached to the side luff lines to hold the sail at an angle, and the ‘itague’ (from *útstag*, outer rope), which supports the yard in the middle. Ropes and manoeuvres, yards and sails are the ‘agrès’ (from *greiði*, equipment). The ‘tolet’ (from *þollr*, wooden peg) is the peg that serves as a fulcrum for the oar, and the ‘guindeau’ (from *vindáss*, winch) is used to raise the anchor.

We should also mention the verbs ‘gréer’ (from *greiða*, same meaning) and its opposite ‘to rig’, ‘to fit out’ (from *skipa*, to organise), ‘to pitch’ (from *bræða*, to coat with pitch or tar), ‘to hoist’ (from *vinda*, to raise), ‘haubaner’ (from *hǫfuðbenda*, stay), ‘arriser’ (from *rif*, reef), ‘cingler’, to set sail (from *sigla*, same meaning), ‘tauder’ (from *tjald*, awning, tent erected on board).

Other words relate to the sea and fishing: the ‘flot’, the rising tide (from Old Norse *flóð*, same meaning); the ‘houle’ and the derived adjective ‘swell’ (from *hol*, ‘hollow’); ‘wave’ and its diminutive ‘little wave’ (from *vágr*, ‘wave’); ‘harbour’ (from *hǫfn* or **hafn*, natural harbour); ‘foreshore’ (from *strǫnd*, shore); ‘cove’ (from *kriki*, nook, bay); the ‘kelp’ (from *vágrek*, meaning ‘that which is washed up by the waves’); ‘tangue’, the muddy, calcareous sand found in estuaries (from *tangi*, meaning ‘strip of land or sand’ – with a shift in meaning to refer specifically to sand); the ‘lobster’ (from *humarr*, same meaning); the ‘crab’ (from *krabbi*, same meaning); the ‘pollock’ (from *lýr*, same meaning); the ‘garfish’ (from *hornfiskr*, same meaning); the ‘porpoise’ (from *marsvín*, sea pig); ‘roe’, fish eggs (from *hrogn*, same meaning); ‘rohart’, walrus ivory (from *hrosshvalr*, walrus). A landing net is also called ‘havenet’ or ‘haveneau’ (from **háfnet*, a net forming a pocket). A ‘raz’ (and its derivative ‘raz-de-marée’) comes from *the* Old Norse *rás* (sea current).

And various other terms are also passed into French. The 'Girouette' comes from *the* Old Norse *veðrviti* (meaning the same thing): the 'wirewite' was a ship's weather vane in Old Norman, and the Jersey dialect has retained the word 'virouette'. 'Mare' comes from the Old Norse *marr* (sea), which took on this meaning in Normandy, perhaps influenced by the Old English *mere*.
'duvet' comes from *dúnn* (same meaning); 'dalle' (and its derivative 'daller') from *dæla* (channel), by metonymy; 'guichet' from *vík* (bay) or *víkja* (to yield).

The word 'gabegie' derives from the Old Norman 'gab' (joke, mockery), which comes from the Old Norse *'gabb'* (same meaning); and a 'gabeur', a joker, comes from the Old Norman 'gaber' (to joke, to mock), which comes from the Old Norse verb *'gabba'* (same meaning). The words 'marque' and 'amer' (and the derivative 'marquer') come from Old Norse *'merki'* (mark). And other verbs such as 'flâner' (and its derivatives 'flâneur', 'flânerie'), from *flana* (to walk, to rush headlong); 'hanter' (literal and figurative sense) from *heimta*, to bring home; 'nantir', from *nám* (taking possession);
'regret' (and its derivatives 'regrets', 'regrettable'), from *gráta* (to weep).

The Norse linguistic influence, which varied depending on the specific languages involved, came about through usage. More often than not, the Vikings did not impose their language on the local populations; instead, the locals learnt specialised vocabulary (relating to shipbuilding, navigation or fishing) that proved necessary, along with a few terms from everyday life. Despite the erosion that has taken place over the centuries, the lexical borrowings that remain today cannot be overlooked.

29
Did the Vikings leave their mark in Normandy?

'Man in English and in Norse [= Old Norse]
Senefie *hom* en Francheiz;
Justez ensemle North è *man*,
Ensemle ditez donc Northman,
That is a man from the North in the
Romance languages [= in the Romance
languages];
From this came the name Normans.
The Normans are usually called [= are
customarily called],
And Normandy, which they have settled,
Because Normandy was so popular,
Who in the land settled [=
remained].
France belongs to Normandy,
That is the people of North beg
[pun!],
'For they came from another land,
To live better, and to conquer.'

Robert WACE, *The Romance of Rou*,
1160

Although Normandy owes its name to the 'men of the North' who settled there, there is little point in looking for many visible traces of their arrival today: there are no Viking graves, no runestones, and the number of archaeological remains is negligible. Among the most remarkable are a pair of bronze fibulae from the second half of the 9th century (discovered near Pîtres), shaped like a tortoise shell and decorated with stylised animals and interlacing patterns; a hoard (discovered near Elbeuf) containing deliberately fragmented silver ingots and English and Carolingian deniers, some of which are bent or scored with a knife, likely buried around 890 by a Viking from the east of England; two hammers of Þórr (found downstream from Rouen), small silver pendants from the 9th or 10th century; and weapons, most often found in the bed of the Seine: three double-edged swords – of one, dating from the 9th century, only the hilt remains, but its pommel and guard are damascened with gold thread –, three axe blades – one of which is particularly finely crafted – and several spearheads. Apart from these few objects, the only concrete evidence left by the Vikings in Normandy is of a linguistic and toponymic nature.

Indeed, the Vikings integrated fairly quickly into the local community, gradually blending in, being baptised and, for the most part, marrying local women, and their language fell into disuse after a few generations. However, certain Norse vocabulary became established: the local population eventually adopted some words used in daily life simply through hearing them, others because new structures required them, and the rest because they expressed concepts for which their own language lacked precise terms.

The dialects of Normandy have retained around a hundred words of Norse origin, a small number of which continue to colour the French spoken by Normans today.

Many of these 'regional' words still in use relate more or less directly to the sea: the coast, fishing and its produce. For example, 'mielles' are dunes, from the Old Norse *melr* (same meaning), and
'milgreu' refers to the marram grass that grows there, in which we can also recognise the word *græs* (grass). 'Tangon' refers to a seaweed with long brown strands, kelp, from the Old Norse *þang* (seaweed).

‘Baite’ means ‘bait’, from *‘beita*’ (same meaning), and ‘baiter’ means ‘to bait the hooks’. Among fish, ‘hâ’ refers to the dogfish, from the Old Norse *hár* (same meaning, or shark, squale); ‘célan’ is the pilchard, a type of large sardine, from *síld* (herring); ‘flondre’ is the flounder, from *flundra* (same meaning). The names of two crabs are related to the Old Norse *hófr* (clog), no doubt because of their shape: the ‘houvet’, the edible crab, and the ‘houvelin’, the spider crab. ‘Flies’ are limpets: these shellfish have a name of the same origin in Faroese: *fliða*.

Other words relate to the countryside and rural activities. For example, the ‘tierre’ is the rope used to tie a cow to a post (from *tjóðr*, same meaning), hence the verbs ‘tierrer’ and ‘détierrer’ (to tie and untie). ‘Rêquer’ means either gathering the last fruits or picking apples, and may derive from *rekja* (to stretch). The ‘gernotte’ or
‘génotte’, a small plant (*Conopodium majus*) whose underground tuber is edible, shares the same origin as the Norwegian *jordnøtt* (same meaning). As for ‘grades’ or ‘gades’, these are redcurrants, from *gaddr* (thorn).

And among the terms of everyday life, we might mention ‘mucre’, meaning mouldy, from the Old Norse *mykr* (manure), a ‘flique’, a slice of bacon, from *flikki* (same meaning); and verbs such as ‘super’, to drink by sucking, from *súpa* (to drink, to lap up), ‘éluger’, to tire, to annoy, from *lýja* (to exhaust), or ‘muler’, to sulk, from *múli* (mouth), also related to the name of the animal reputed to be stubborn, the mule.

Some Normans still bear surnames derived from Old Norse. Surnames only became established in Normandy around the 15th century, but throughout the Middle Ages Scandinavian first names were in use: the last attested examples, Toustain and Anquetil, were still in use at the beginning of the 16th century.

A handful of surnames leave little doubt as to their Norse origin, including Anquetil (*Ásketill*), Aumond, Esmond, Osmond (*Ásmundr*), Auzouf, Ozouf (*Ásúlfr*), Hastain (*Hásteinn*), Havard (*Hávarðr*), Inguier (*Ingvarr*), Quetel, Quétil, Quetier (*Ketill*), Thouroude, Troude (*Þorvaldr*), Torchetil, Turquetil (*Þorketill*), Tostain, Toutain, Toustain (*Þorsteinn*), Tougard (*Þorgarðr*), Turgis, Tourgis (*Þorgils*), Turgot (*Þorgautr*), Turmod (*Þormóðr*), Turquier, Turquet (*Þorkell*), Turrou (*Þorúlfr*), Yver, Yvard (*Ívarr*).

However, as Scandinavian names bear similarities to many Germanic names, it can be difficult to distinguish between them. The names Angot and Burnouf, for example, are derived either from Norse forms, *Ásgautr* and *Bjǫrnúlfr*, or from Frankish forms, *Ansgaud* and *Bernulf*.

However, the most significant legacy the Vikings left to Normandy lies in its place names. Admittedly, the region was already populated when they arrived, and many existing place names were retained. But wherever they settled, they gave new names, on the one hand to various features of the landscape (landforms, terrain, waterways, forests), and on the other hand to their settlements, renaming the farms they took over and establishing new ones themselves.

The most characteristic place names of the Viking settlement, from the turn of the 10th century onwards, are formed of two purely Scandinavian elements, with the determiner preceding the determined. The name Sanvic, for example, now a district of Le Havre, first attested in 1035 as 'Sanwic', is composed of *sandr* (sand) and *vík* (bay); it refers to a 'sandy bay'.

Hybrid place names—that is, those in which only one of the two elements is Scandinavian—correspond in most cases to the following decades and bear witness to Scandinavian penetration throughout the 10th century. These are almost always a Norse male name combined with a Romance appellative: thus the name Champosoult, now a village in the Pays d'Auge, attested in the Latinised form 'Campus Osulfi' around 1200, has as its second element the Old Norse man's name *Ásúlfr* (or its Anglo-Scandinavian form *Osulf*) and originally meant 'Ásúlfr's field'.

Finally, in addition to these compound terms, there are numerous simple place-names of Scandinavian origin. Most are terms that also appear in compound forms, but, having no doubt been quickly incorporated into everyday language, they are used on their own, usually preceded by the article and sometimes in diminutive forms. For example, Les Équets (*sker*, reef), Le Bau (*boði*, rock just above the water), L'État (*stakkr*, high rock, at sea) are rocks on the Cotentin coast. And place names such as La Hogue, but also Les Hogues, Le Hoguet, La Hoguelle and Les Hoguettes all derive from the word *haugr*, meaning a height – but these forms proliferated well after the Viking era, sometimes as late as the end of the Middle Ages.

Among the place names describing nature – at least originally, as many have now become the names of localities – the most numerous are those containing the term *bekkr*, meaning a stream: for example, Houlbec, whose first element is *holr*, hollow (in the sense of deep or sunken); we also find, on their own, Le Bec or Le Becquet. Names ending in 'dal(le)' are derived from *dalr* (valley): Oudalle (*úlfr*, wolf), Tourdal (*þorn*, thorn) or simply La Dalle. As for forests, the term *skógr* (forest) is rarely encountered; instead, only *lundr* (wood) is used, forming names ending in 'lon(de)': Yquelon (*eik*, oak), Étoublon (*stubbi*, stump) or, on their own, La Londe, La Londette, Les Londes.

The term *hólmr* (islet) has given rise, on the one hand, to 'hom(m)e', mainly used on its own: Le Homme, Le Houmet, and, on the other hand, to 'hou': Quettehou (*Ketill*), Néhou (*Njáll*). The term *haugr* (mound, hill) occurs on its own and can take the form La Hogue or La Hougue; similarly, *hol* or *hola* (hole, hollow) becomes La Houle, Les Houles. Names ending in 'mare' use the term *marr* (sea), used to mean a pond or stagnant water: Collemare (*Koli*), Boquemare (*bók*, beech). Names ending in 'vic' or 'vy' derive from *vík* (cove, bay): Brévy (*breiðr*, wide).

And various Scandinavian terms were used to a more limited extent in Normandy: among others, *hallr* (slope), which gave rise to La Haule; *klif* (cliff, escarpment), found in Carqueclif; *steinn* (stone) in Grestain; *land* (land, terrain), as in Le Tingland (possible site of an ancient local *þing*, in La Hague); *díki* (embankment, ditch), as in Le Hague-Dike (a Bronze Age earthwork blocking the tip of La Hague, which owes only its name to the Vikings). And Dieppe undoubtedly bears the Scandinavian name of the river flowing through the town, derived from the adjective *djúpr* (deep) combined with *á* (river), meaning 'the deep river'.

Among place names relating to settlements (from the very beginning), a great many end in 'tot'. The term *topt* (or *toft*) means land, with or without a dwelling, but also describes a farm and its outbuildings; it is found on its own, as in Le Tot, Tôtes, or in compound forms: Gonnetot (*Gunni*), Tourmetot (*Þormóðr*), Lintot (*lind*, lime tree).

Conversely, contrary to expectations, place names ending in 'torp' or 'tourp' (*þorp*, isolated farmstead or hamlet) – Saussetour (*Saxi*), or simply Le Torp – and those ending in 'bu' (*býr*, farmstead, village) – Carquebut (*kirkja*, church) –

are very rarely found. Having become Frenchified after one or two generations, the Vikings seem to have preferred to use the Romance term 'ville', derived from *the* Latin **villa** in the sense of 'rural estate' – perhaps adopted by the earliest among them, following the naming conventions of their Frankish predecessors, when they were granted or seized large estates. There are numerous hybrid place names ending in 'ville' whose first element is a Norse personal name: for example, Trouville (*Þorólfr*), Hatainville (*Hásteinn*), Helleville (*Helgi*). Some thus date back to the early 10th century, but others are recorded later as well.

Other Norse names were also used to describe the new settlements, though to a much more limited extent. Place names ending in 'beuf' often derive from *búð* (hut): Lindebeuf (*lind*, lime tree), Elbeuf (*vella*, spring); those ending in 'cotte' come from *kot* (hut): Caudecotte (*kaldr*, cold), Brocottes (*brú*, bridge); those ending in 'hus' come from *hús* (house): Étainhus (*steinn*, stone); and those ending in 'écal(e)' come from *skáli* (temporary shelter): Touffrécale (*Þórfreðr*); not forgetting the few Houlgates, formed from *holr* (hollow) and *gata* (path).

Finally, various place names relate to human activities of that period, such as those ending in 'gard', derived from **garðr* (an enclosure, usually cultivated, near a farm): Les Bigards (*býr*, bee), Lingard (*lín*, flax); or the numerous names ending in 'tuit', from *the* Old Norse *þveit* (cleared land), also used on its own (Le Thuit): Bracquetuit (*brakni*, fern), Tontuit (*þorn*, thorn).

Scandinavian place names enable us both to identify the areas where the Vikings settled – essentially the Pays de Caux, the Roumois and the northern Cotentin – and even to date them or determine the origin of the settlers. Unfortunately, many names have been distorted over the centuries. How would we know, for example, that the name Tout-la-Ville, a hamlet between Deauville and Pont-l'Évêque, has Scandinavian roots, if an ancient Latinised form (*Torlavilla*, in 1198) did not indicate a corruption of the Old Norse male name *Þorlákr*?

The fact remains that the Old Norse vocabulary found in Norman dialects, the modern surnames derived from names once borne by Vikings, and all these place names of Scandinavian (or partly Scandinavian) origin are traces of a distant Norman identity that took shape in the 10th and 11th centuries.

30
Have the Vikings made their mark on French literature?

> ‘People who from the rocks of Scandinavia,
> Descended as conquerors upon enslaved Europe,
> You uphold the virtues of heroes on your shores,
> Yet you know how to respect the inhabitants of the hamlets.”
>
> Jean-François DE SAINT-LAMBERT,
> *The Seasons*, 1769

Over the centuries, the theme of the Vikings has regularly featured in French literature, but it has evolved over time: moving away from the terrifying image of the Middle Ages, the Romantics portrayed them as symbols of youth, bravery and adventure, before the portrayal subsequently became completely exaggerated.

In the 18th century, Voltaire continued to portray them as he had in the past.

In his *Essay on Manners*, he writes, among other things:

> “Banditry and piracy were as necessary to them as carnage is to ferocious beasts.”

Only Rollo, “the most illustrious of these northern brigands”, finds favour in his eyes, for he “was the only one of these barbarians who ceased to deserve the name by seeking a permanent settlement” – which does not prevent him from maintaining that Normandy was usurped from the French crown.

Montesquieu also discusses , very briefly, the incursions “Norman” incursions and the founding of Normandy. He writes, for example, in 1734, in his **Considerations on the Causes of the Greatness of the Romans and Their Decline**:

> “Thus, when the Normans, the very image of the Empire’s conquerors, had ravaged France for several centuries and found nothing left to take, they accepted a province that was entirely deserted and divided it among themselves.”

However, Montesquieu was no stranger to the radical shift in the image of the Viking that would take place in the following century, for he rediscovered the theory of climates and expounded it forcefully in 1748 in *The Spirit of the Laws*. According to him, climate influences the temperament of peoples.

‘Those from cold countries,’ he writes, ‘are as brave as young men.’ ’ And he asserts that it is in northern Europe ‘that these valiant nations are formed, who leave their lands to destroy tyrants and slaves’. The Baron de La Brède’s thinking, justifying all the misinterpretations that would follow, allowed for the proclamation of the Vikings’ superiority, which would become the new essence of the literary theme.

In the 19th century, Charles-Victor Prévost d’Arlincourt, the author of **La Caroléide** (1818), was full of praise for the Vikings:

> “No people of antiquity were more enamoured of glory than the Scandinavians: their religion was designed to exalt their natural courage.”

And Charles-Hubert Millevoye was among the first to suggest their superiority. In *Alfred*, in 1815, he has Ubba, the son of Recner (in other words, Ragnarr *loðbrók*), say:

> "All must pay tribute to the children of
> the sword! He who wields a blade,
> friends, possesses all!"

Chateaubriand, too, admired the courage, energy and virility of the men of the North; in 1826, he wrote in the conclusion to his **Reasoned Analysis of the History of France**:

> "When barbarism invades civilisation, it fertilises it with its vigour and youth; when, on the contrary, civilisation invades barbarism, it leaves it barren."

And as early as 1809, when he published **Les Martyrs**, it was **Krákumál** – of which he had read Paul-Henri Mallet's translation – that inspired him to compose his
"bardic song" of the Franks sung by the "Barbarians" as they prepared to face the Roman legions. He reduced the number of stanzas to two and noted himself:

> "I have imitated Lodbrog's song here, adding a refrain and a few details about weapons, appropriate to my subject."

He does indeed mention the 'double-edged francisca', which is a Frankish weapon; but the refrain already appears in the Norse original – it constitutes the first verse of each stanza (except of the last),
'*Hjoggum vér með* hjǫrvi', which Mallet translated as: 'We struck with the sword' – and Chateaubriand simply added the name of the Frankish king: Pharamond.

> "Pharamond! Pharamond! We fought with the sword."

The first stanza of the bardic poem is a fairly faithful compilation of stanzas 2 and 6 of the Norse poem, but the second strays further from it, and there is no equivalent in the *Krákumál* to its strange phrase:
"Let us choose wives whose milk is blood." On the other hand, it concludes in the manner of the last two original lines, which Mallet translated as: "The hours of my life have passed; I shall die laughing."

> “Pharamond, the bard’s song is finished, the hours of life are passing; we shall smile when the time comes to die!”

He does indeed yield to this image from the poem, which he also evokes in the section devoted to the ‘Customs of the Barbarians’ in one of his *Historical Studies* (1831):

> “Laughing as he breathed his last was the hallmark of the hero. Saxon the grammarian says of a warrior: He fell, laughed and died.”

A tragedy in five acts, **Harald, or the Scandinavians**, was performed in Paris in 1824: the author was Pierre Victor Lerebours. But Victor Hugo’s play, *Athélie*, *or The Scandinavians*, was never completed. Indeed, as early as 1817, he attempted to venture into the world of the Vikings, fully establishing the plot and structure of the play, but wrote only the first two acts.

The entire story *of Athélie* takes place within the Temple of Odin, in the sacred grove of Tornstan, between a marble tomb and an altar draped in black. Régner, King of Scandinavia, had a daughter named Athélie, whom he betrothed to Duncar on his deathbed, because Duncar had saved his daughter’s life. Yet Athélie loves a young warrior, Althur. Duncar is murdered. The tragedy begins after the crime: plans for a marriage between Athélie, widow and Queen of Scandinavia, and Althur, who happens to be the king’s murderer, form the plot. The melodrama must reach its climax before the illuminated altar: not with a wedding, but with a murder and a double suicide.

It is clear that, despite the setting, a few names (such as that of Athélie’s father) and other barbaric elements, this play in no way reflects any attempt on Victor Hugo’s part to depict any kind of Norse reality.

And Jules Barbey d’Aurevilly, though a Norman by birth and well aware of Normandy’s Scandinavian origins, mentions the Vikings in only a few lines throughout his entire body of work. He writes, in his novel **Une vieille maîtresse** (1851):

> ‘They are Normans. They are descended from the pirates who brought Charlemagne to his knees and who came to conquer, in light boats

‘of wicker, the ground into which they have sunk like an anchor that must never be raised again.’

When Eugène Sue began writing **Les Mystères du* peuple* in 1849, it was a monumental undertaking: a sixteen-volume proletarian epic, the final volume of which was published in 1857, the year of his death. In it, he traces the life of a working-class family from 57 BC to the Second Republic. It is in Volume VI that he recounts the Viking raids on France, in the chapter entitled:
‘The Arrowhead, or the Parisian Boatman and the Virgin with the Shield (818–912).’

In **Les Mystères du peuple**, women often play a dominant and always original role. And the men from the North are accompanied by warrior maidens, led by the beautiful Shigne, clad in chain mail. To Gaëlo the pirate, her ally and rival, Shigne assures him that her Amazons are stronger than the champions he boasts of commanding. Fascinated by this daring woman, he asks her: “Must one therefore defeat you to please you?” To which she replies: “I do not know… I have never been defeated.”

Leconte de Lisle, for his part, after publishing his *Poèmes antiques*, composed the *Poèmes barbares* in 1862. In it, alongside his poems of the East, he reserves a special place for the North with its strange cosmogony and all its harshness.

The Death of Sigurd draws on the first of the great heroic poems of *the Edda*, **Guðrúnarkviða**, which he read in Xavier Marmier’s translation: **The Song of Gudrune**. But the ending of the poem is his own creation, since ‘the Frankish Gudruna’ is still unaware of the part played by ‘the Burgundian Brunhild’ in the murder of her husband, and even of her rival’s love.

To compose *Le Cœur de Hialmar*, Leconte de Lisle drew inspiration from another of Xavier Marmier’s translations, *Chant de mort de Hialmar*, that of a poem found in the *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks* (*Saga of Hervǫr and Heiðrekr*, from the late 13th century). Hjálmarr and Ǫrvar-Oddr face Angantýr and his eleven brothers on the island of *Sámsey*. Mortally wounded, Hjálmarr (who has killed Angantýr) entrusts to one of his comrades-in-arms the red gold ring intended for his fiancée, Ingibjǫrg, the daughter of the King of Sweden.

But in the new French version, it is his own heart that Hjálmarr asks the raven to tear from his chest and carry to his fair betrothed in Uppsala:

> ‘Come here, Raven, my brave man-eater! Open my chest
> with your iron beak.
> You will find us tomorrow just as we are. Take my
> still-warm heart to Ylmer’s daughter.”

The raven’s ‘iron beak’ and Hialmar’s ‘still-warm heart’ are details imagined by Leconte de Lisle, which emphasise the savage nature of this scene.

For *The Sword of Angantyr*, he draws on a second poem from the *Hervarar saga ok Heiðreks*: *Hervararkviða*, translated under the title *‘Song of* Hervor’, in which Hervǫr, the daughter of Angantýr, buried beneath her mound, demands her inheritance—*Tyrfingr*, Hjálmarr’s murderous sword—even though this weapon is destined to bring about her family’s downfall.

Leconte de Lisle distorts the legend somewhat but retains the dramatic framework of the Norse poem: it is to punish her murderers and avenge the family’s honour that Hervor demands her sword. He makes her the perfect heroine and thus illustrates the spirit of vengeance attributed to the Vikings.

Finally, **The Legend of the Norns** is inspired by the **Vǫluspá**. Each of the three Norns speaks in turn: the first, Urda (Urðr), recounts the origins of the world; the second, Verdandi (Verðandi), describes the present, the reign of the gods; and the third, Skulda (Skuld), foretells the cataclysms of the end of the world, without any subsequent mention, as in the Norse poem, of the emergence of a new world – which makes the prophecy all the more sombre.

It was in the final decades of the 19th century that Norman poets glorified and popularised the Viking theme. The first among them, Aristide Frémine, whose lyricism far outweighed his knowledge of the ancient Scandinavians, wrote **La Mort du Viking** in 1881, a poem describing the funeral of a Viking chieftain on the moors of La Hague. Among his many successors, we might mention Louis Beuve, author of **Hymne à la Normandie** (1899), for whom the ferocity and bravery of the

Vikings is matched only by their zeal to promote the Normandy region; Charles-Théophile Féret, who displays even greater fervour in his collection **La Normandie exaltée** (1902) and presents himself as the leading figure of this Norman school; or Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, who published several collections in which she championed fidelity to Scandinavian origins, such as *Ferveur* (1902), as well as a verse tragedy entitled *Thoborge, Queen of the Sea* (1905), whose heroine, having set out alongside a Viking named Rolf, ultimately succumbs to the charms of a Frankish monk.

From the 20th century onwards, the Viking theme has been explored by novelists with varying degrees of success. Whilst Paul Vialar's novel, **Les Vikings**, published in 1953, captures the reality of the period fairly well – Bjǫrn, the hero, who sails the seas and takes part, amongst other things, in the siege of Paris in 885, is a rather credible Viking – neither René Hardy's novel, *La Route des cygnes* (1967), which recounts the story of the Vikings' discovery of America, nor Marie-Josèphe Guers's *La Fiancée du Nord* (1992), a fictionalised account of Aude-à-l'esprit-profond, a character inspired by Auðr *djúpauðga* in the Icelandic sagas, avoid the overuse of pseudo-Scandinavian vocabulary and errors, some of which are quite glaring.

Yet the Viking theme now takes on all manner of forms.

In 1999, Marc Paillet published **Les Vikings aux bracelets* d'or* (The Vikings *with Golden Bracelets*), whose subtitle, 'An Investigation by Erwin the Saxon', immediately establishes the genre as a detective mystery. Erwin, Charlemagne's ambassador to the land of the Danes in 806, finds himself compelled to discover who killed the chieftain Erik the Stammerer. Marc Paillet makes good use of his research on the subject and is not sparing with his footnotes to underpin a narrative that has the merit of remaining sober and precise. This is not the case with another crime novel, *Runes* (2011), by Pierre-Olivier Lombarteix, which is set in present-day Dublin, on the trail of a serial killer who calls himself 'the Viking'.

The first volume of the trilogy **Les Racines de l'ordre noir** by Belgian author Patrick Weber, **Vikings** (2006), blends Nazis and Vikings: the story is set in 1944 and an SS lieutenant is tasked with finding a secret weapon that the first Duke of Normandy, Rollon, is said to have taken to his grave: 'a magic hammer that the Vikings call the Weapon of God' – Thor's hammer, which could change the course of the war.

Patrick Grainville's novel **Le Dernier Viking** (1980) is set in present-day Normandy and features Martel, a peasant with a wild imagination, who relives the adventures of his ancestors in his dreams:

> "I am the great driving Hammer, the phallus and the crude tool! The red-haired reveller, the last Viking!"

A sort of contemporary reincarnation of þórr (Thor), he is flanked by Lucas, a former waiter, a subtle blend of Loki and Óðinn, and Gabriel, a baker and beekeeper, not to mention Odile, his mistress.

Finally, in a completely different vein, **L'Aigle de sang** (2001), a fantasy thriller by Jean-Christophe Chaumette, combines Scandinavian mythology, ufology and aliens in a near future where the world is threatened with destruction.

The Viking theme is inexhaustible and continues to stir passions and fantasies, at the risk of becoming overused.

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